

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Baker Donelson's Linda Klein

Law360, New York (February 04, 2014, 1:01 PM ET) -- Linda A. Klein is managing shareholder in Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz PC's Georgia offices and a member of the firm's board of directors. Her practice includes most types of business dispute resolution.

In June 1997, Klein became the first woman to serve as president of the state bar of Georgia. She is immediate past chairwoman of the American Bar Association's House of Delegates, the second-ranking officer position in the association. Through the years, she has chaired many ABA committees and continues her American Bar Association service as chairwoman of ABA Day, member of the council of the ABA Section of International Law and serves on the board of editors of the Law Practice Management Magazine.

Among her many honors are the prestigious Margaret Brent Achievement Award, awarded by the ABA, and the Randolph Thrower Award for Lifetime Achievement. She has lectured in France, Sweden, Spain, Canada and Russia, and the Southeast United States. She is a member of the American Law Institute, and a mediator and arbitrator.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: The old saying, "the harder I worked, the luckier I got" comes to mind. I was the only woman in the law firm. I knew that I had to succeed or I would be the last woman.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: You must keep in mind that you are a role model for others. That is true for all senior-level people in law firms, not just women.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: While waiting for my civil case to be called for a hearing before another judge, I sat down in a courtroom crowded with women and their children who were waiting for child support hearings. I was stunned when a judge, now long deceased, told the entire courtroom that he only allowed two women lawyers to appear before him and he named them. The courtroom immediately became quiet because most of the women were represented by women lawyers who were not among the two named. There were no women judges in this county. I approached the judge who made the statement. He agreed that his statement would cause the citizens in the courtroom to believe that he would not give equal justice. I am told that he retracted the statement and apologized.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: Women wear many hats, and some hats are not as nice as others. Take the job no one else wants to do, learn the job, excel in the job, enjoy working and connecting with the others involved, then move on to the next job no one wants and repeat all of the above. You will develop contacts that will be available to you throughout your career and will earn the reputation of being a person willing to take on the toughest or worst job and doing it well. Better jobs will follow because all leaders want someone on their team who excels in what they do. Soon you will be the leader.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: First, it is important to interview a diverse group of candidates for every open position. Women must feel welcome and comfortable in a law firm. Women's affinity groups are one example of a way to allow women to talk among themselves, share issues and clients, and allow the firm to solve problems early. Flexible working hours and welcoming good lawyers back into your firm after they take time off for their families. Women should be visible in leadership at all levels.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: Throughout my career I have been privileged to meet many attorneys whom I have admired. Many stand out, but Justice Carol Hunstein of the Georgia Supreme Court is a very special person. She overcame enormous obstacles to become a lawyer and then a judge. She was the first person in her family to go to college. She attended college as a young, single parent, working full-time and attending school full-time. Her service to the profession and the public has been stellar. She was chair of some of the toughest commissions in addition to her judicial responsibilities. She was one of the few incumbents to win re-election despite being substantially out-spent. Every newspaper that endorsed in her contested race endorsed Justice Hunstein.

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