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Diversity – Law Firms

Finding Balance: The Women's Forum At Norris McLaughlin & Marcus

The Editor interviews *Jeralyn Lawrence*, Partner, and *Deanna L. Koestel*, Associate, of the Women's Forum at Norris McLaughlin & Marcus, P.A.

Editor: Would you tell us about your work experience?

Lawrence: After law school and a clerkship, I came to Norris McLaughlin and have been here for ten years. I am a Partner with the firm and practice exclusively in divorce and family law.

Koestel: I began my experience at Norris McLaughlin & Marcus as a summer associate during law school and returned here after graduation. I have been at Norris for six years, now, and practice in the Commercial Litigation Group, with a focus on construction litigation.

Editor: What is the Women's Forum and why was it created?

Lawrence: The Women's Forum is comprised of Norris McLaughlin's 29 women attorneys. In 2007 a group of us attended an event held by the National Association of Women's Lawyers, where we heard Judge Katherine Hayden speak. Her powerful speech inspired a discussion among us about the many talented women we have in the firm and our feeling of being pulled in many different directions. We were already communicating well with each other individually, but we wanted to expand our dialogue, so we founded the Women's Forum. We have found too that as the firm grows, it has become important to "cross sell" our skill sets, and the Women's Forum has helped us to see what each of us brings to the table. For instance, if I get a referral for construction litigation, I can recommend Deanna and



**Jeralyn
Lawrence**



**Deanna L.
Koestel**

describe her particular expertise.

Koestel: Additionally, the Women's Forum created opportunities for associates to interact with and learn from our female partners. The Women's Forum bridges the gap between associates and partners and helps younger attorneys form mentorships with women who've faced the challenges of being a woman in this profession.

Editor: How was the Women's Forum formed, and what is its mission?

Lawrence: Five of us – four partners plus Deanna, who represented the associates – formed a steering committee. We decided on our basic mission, which is to foster equality among women in the firm and nurture relationships across practice areas and between levels. We then invited all of the women attorneys to join the Forum. We also wanted to use the Forum as an avenue to network with other female professionals, who often prefer to seek legal counsel from other women.

Once we had our first meeting and figured out what we wanted to do as an entity, we established separate committees for marketing, education and special events. The individual subcommittees generally meet once a month, and the steering committee meets

quarterly to touch base and decide where we're going next.

Editor: Can you tell us about your events thus far?

Koestel: We began with a small Women's Forum "kick-off" event held at a local wine shop to get everyone motivated. We then quickly turned our attention to two major events. The first was to participate in Somerset County's Girls on the Run. Girls on the Run is a national program for girls in grades 3-5 which strives to educate and prepare girls for a lifetime of self-respect and healthy living. The ten-week program culminates with the girls running a 5k race. The program currently serves more than 500 girls in the Somerset County area. The 5k race itself is open to the general public; I discovered the Girls on the Run program myself by running in the race several years ago. So, when the Women's Forum began discussing ways to interact with and promote our mission within the community, I informed the Forum about the Girls on the Run program and thought it would be great given our mutual goals of fostering women's self-images and promoting leaders in the community. Norris McLaughlin & Marcus became a platinum-level sponsor for the event; the Women's Forum helped raise the money for the Girls on the Run program; and a large group of us volunteered on race day. It was a huge success: more people participated in Girls on the Run in 2007 than they ever had in the past.

For our second event, the Forum put on the 2007 Fall Festival of the Arts, which was held in October at the Madison Hotel. This was a charity event which raised money for the Lung Cancer Circle of Hope and the Somerset County's Resource Center for Women & Their Families.

Please email the interviewees at jllawrence@nmmlaw.com or dlkoestel@nmmlaw.com with questions about this interview.

Lawrence: At the Fall Festival of the Arts, the Forum hosted an auction and all of the proceeds went to those two charities. We asked people to donate things themselves or to contact local businesses to donate, say, a gift certificate, a handbag or a service. Most of the auction was silent, but part of it was live – Edd Hogan, one of the firm’s partners and a professional auctioneer, ran the show and was wonderfully entertaining. We invited clients of the firm, potential clients, and friends. Many of the firm’s attorneys came as well, and it was a lovely party. We raised about \$20,000 for the charities.

Editor: What other types of activities does the Women’s Forum organize?

Lawrence: With the help of our Chief Marketing Officer, Ed Miller, we hosted a motivational speaker Eva Wisnik, whom we invited to teach us about marketing ourselves. She taught us a dozen or so “hot tips” to grow our practices. Another day, a financial expert (and female client) spoke to the Forum about investments and personal finance.

Editor: Anything planned for 2008?

Koestel: Currently we are organizing an educational seminar to which we will be inviting our clients and friends. Members of the Forum will be forming a team to participate in the Race for the Cure which will be held for the first time in Northern New Jersey in May. We have also begun the preparation for the second annual charity event in the fall of 2008.

Editor: How does the Women’s Forum fit into the overall culture of the firm?

Lawrence: The culture of Norris McLaughlin makes it a fantastic place to work. This year our firm ranked among the Best Places to Work in New Jersey for the second year in a row. If you’re a lawyer, this is the place to be. Norris organizes events such as Halloween parades and Santa visits for employees’ children, which shows that the firm cares about more than the billable hours of its employees. This firm has always promoted balance; it’s part of our mission statement for our recruitment committee. We want high-caliber lawyers, but we also want people who maintain balance with home life or other activities outside the firm. So the culture of the firm lent itself directly to the creation of the Women’s Forum. We have top-notch women attorneys with a firm that is very receptive and very supportive of its women attorneys.

Norris also encourages men and women alike to be entrepreneurial with their practices. The door is always open to our manag-

ing partners, and Ed Miller will always take the time to speak with you about any article you want to write or any client with whom you’d like to make contact. Norris really *invests* in its lawyers.

Finally, the firm is flexible with “face-time,” which is an especially meaningful asset for attorneys who are also mothers. As long as you are performing to the firm’s high standards – whether you work early in the morning or late at night – you can take the necessary day-time hours when you need to be “class mom” or take your child to her softball game. Certainly flex-time is frequently discussed at the Women’s Forum, as there are so many of us who have children. Many of us are constantly seeking advice on how to manage time effectively. We swap information and phone numbers – my daughter’s emergency phone list at daycare includes many of the women here. The Women’s Forum is an excellent support system and a wonderful resource to have.

Editor: Where do you see the Women’s Forum heading?

Koestel: As the Forum develops and evolves, we anticipate hosting more events and seminars which promote our mission. Additionally, we hope to increase the Firm’s presence and involvement within our community at large, and to continue our networking with other female professionals.

Lawrence: Exactly. And I think by expanding our reach, we can help grow Norris McLaughlin & Marcus overall.

Koestel: I would also add the firm’s diversity and the number of women we have across many different practice areas will naturally help us to expand our reach as one of New Jersey’s premier law firms for all aspects of the law.

Editor: Tell us about the Women’s Forum becoming a founding member of the New Jersey Council on Gender Parity in Labor & Education’s Forum on Workplace Practices in Law.

Koestel: The NJ Council on Gender Parity in Labor & Education’s Forum on Workplace Practices in Law is a consortium of law firms that promotes women’s leadership and seeks to overcome obstacles such as the high attrition rate among women. The overall mission of the council is to study law firms and the women in them to determine how we can improve our lives. Women are pulled in many different directions: we are expected to take on most of the responsibility for the family, and trying to put 100 percent into your family and 100 percent into work is simply impossible.

Editor: Has the Women’s Forum helped women at Norris in their professional lives?

Lawrence: Very much so. We’ve had a lot of success in marketing ourselves to other men in the firm, as well as to male clients and attorneys outside the firm. Our male colleagues are beginning to see the Forum for the excellent source of referrals that it is. Hopefully this will close any gap, or any perception of a gap, between men and women at the firm. The male attorneys here are already extremely supportive of us.

Koestel: Everyone has been very supportive. Our clients and colleagues alike appreciate the Forum, because it allows younger professional women to gain advice from women who have gone through the ranks and met the many challenges they face. Additionally, the Forum has increased awareness within the community regarding the firm’s diversity and the number of women we have across many different practice areas. This awareness will naturally help us, as attorneys, to expand our professional networks and to highlight our firm as one of New Jersey’s premier law firms for all aspects of the law.

Editor: A current issue that we’re hearing a lot from law firms is the over-stressed court system. Have you experienced this also, and is this a subject at the Women’s Forum?

Lawrence: The courts are tremendously backlogged, and this is definitely something we speak about at the Women’s Forum! The judges are working as hard as they can, but they’re overworked, underpaid and understaffed. Our firm has responded to the problem by delving deeper into various forms of alternate dispute resolution. I am a mediator, as is Judge William Dreier, a Member of the firm, as well as many other attorneys in the firm. Norris boasts leaders in the field who mediate and/or arbitrate on a daily basis, as well as a large number of mediators and arbitrators who can offer ADR to our clients. In my practice area, I am usually looking at a two-year wait for a divorce trial; almost all of my cases go to mediation or arbitration instead.

Editor: It seems to me that women may actually be naturally suited to ADR work. Do you find this to be the case?

Lawrence: Absolutely. In my experience, female attorneys tend to listen well to both sides of a story and prefer to find workable solutions for both sides before going to litigation. I think ADR may well be a natural avenue for many women attorneys.