

Profiles in Power

A ♦ SPECIAL ♦ SUPPLEMENT ♦ MARCH 30, 1998

50 The Fifty Most Influential Women Lawyers In America

One of The 50 Top Women Lawyers

Look Who's Running the Show Now



Cristina C. Arguedas

44, Name partner at Emeryville, Calif.'s Cooper, Arguedas & Cassman

Ms. Arguedas is a past president of California Attorneys for Criminal Justice and former chair of U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer's judicial screening committee. A former deputy federal public defender in the Northern District of California, she is often involved in high-profile criminal cases and is noted for her tenacious cross-examination skills. She and her law partner, Penny Cooper, got murder charges against millionaire developer Michael Blatt dropped. She represented Wedtech defendant W. Franklyn Chinn. And she helped the O.J. Simpson defense team during trial preparations by playing the role of prosecutor Marcia Clark and performing a mock cross-examination of Mr. Simpson, which she said "was like being asked to pitch in the World Series." Ms. Arguedas, a 1979 graduate of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, S.I. Newhouse Center for Law & Justice, Newark, has also served as a lawyer representative to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals' Judicial Conference.

Breaking Through

Women crack the glass ceiling to wield power in all areas of the profession.

By Elaine R. Friedman

Women comprise about 27 percent of U.S. lawyers and, since 1987, 37 percent of all law school graduates. But only eight of the 100 most influential attorneys in the U.S., according to The NLJ's 1997 survey of that name, are women. [4-28-97.]

That scarcity at the very top of the pyramid masks women's very real progress into and through the slightly lower corridors. "We now have more women who have been in the profession for 30 years," said Karen J. Mathis, a partner at Denver's Hall & Mathis P.C. and chair of the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession. In that time they have achieved prominence not only in the areas of family law and trusts and estates, their traditional outlets, and in government, academia and public interest work, but are driving complex litigation, negotiating mergers and supervising the legal operations of America's biggest corporations.

To document this progress, the NLJ set out to identify the 50 most influential women in the profession. The pattern that emerges is reminiscent of our 1997 list of the 100 Most Influential Lawyers, except that it has hardly any practitioners who dominate their large corporate firms—a staple of the longer list.

"In the larger firms, seniority is a fact of life," said Robert C. Heim, chair of the litigation department at Philadelphia's Dechert Price & Rhoads and former chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession. "Women are still underrepresented in law partnerships, so you'll find fewer of them in leadership positions."

Women such as Harriet E. Miers of Dallas' Locke Purnell Rain Harrell P.C., the first woman to become managing partner at a major Texas firm, and M. Margaret McKeown, a partner at Seattle's Perkins Coie, are making their way onto firm management and executive committees, but in small numbers. Our research showed only one woman managing partner—Debora de Hoyos—of a megafirm—Chicago's Mayer Brown & Platt, the nation's eighth-largest, according to the NLJ's 1997 survey of the

250 largest firms.

General counsel, however, comprise almost 20 percent of our list, and the corporations represented include such giants as General Mills, American Airlines and J.P. Morgan & Co. Another six practice in the area of corporate/securities, another traditional male bastion.

"The configuration of corporate legal departments is different [from law firms], and rising to a level of leadership is comparatively easier for women," said Mr. Heim. "Corporations have been quicker to recognize [women's] talent in that regard."

Still, almost a third of the list work in either academia or government, where women found equal opportunity somewhat sooner than they did in the for-profit sector. Only three women on our list are family or trusts and estates lawyers, but that may reflect how much harder it is to wield influence representing individuals than corporations.

By far the largest contingent—15—practices in New York. Texas boasts five, and Chicago four. As was the case in the 1997 male and female ranking, northern Californians—eight—top southern Californians, who number only four.

Three on the list are partners at New York's Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom L.L.P. Three others have at some point worked at New York's Debevoise & Plimpton. The average age of the women on the list is 50, with Sara Lee's Janet Langford Kelly the youngest, at 39.

To develop a roster of nominees, the NLJ questioned more than a hundred attorneys—men as well as women—across the United States and invited nominations from readers. The 50 ultimately chosen received multiple endorsements from lawyers familiar with their work and qualified to assess the extent of their influence on the profession and the wider world. These subjective assessments we then checked against the public record of the nominees' accomplishments.

We expected some opposition to our distinguishing women attorneys from attorneys in general. After all, there is no female style of practicing law. But almost all the lawyers we canvassed were unabashedly enthusiastic, nominating even adversaries.

Actually, gender does come into play in exercising influence and building a career. As the NLJ has reported [10-9-95], women lawyers are networking to promote their female peers. The nominees themselves were an invaluable resource in identifying other prominent female lawyers, including such up-and-coming attorneys as litigator Kim Juanita Askew, a partner at Dallas' Hughes & Luce L.L.P., media lawyer Kelli L. Sager, a partner in the Los Angeles office of Seattle's Davis Wright Tremaine L.L.P., and litigator Christina M. Tchen, a partner in the Chicago office of Skadden Arps, who stand an excellent chance of showing up on future NLJ power lists.

"Women are networking far more because they see that it works. A rising tide floats all boats," said Mr. Heim.

Women such as Barbara Lynn, a partner at Dallas' Carrington, Coleman, Sloman & Blumenthal, who is chair-elect of the ABA's litigation section, and Janet L. McDavid, a partner at Washington, D.C.'s Hogan & Hartson L.L.P., who is vice-chair of the ABA's section of antitrust law, are rising in bar and other professional organizations. Service on corporate boards and on government and industry advisory panels also counted in a nominee's favor.

In the NLJ's call for reader nominations, we specifically excluded lawyers who currently serve as judges, as well as elected officials, which precluded selection of such otherwise worthy nominees as Christine O. Gregoire, Washington State's attorney general, and Louise H. Renne, San Francisco city attorney. We also excluded from consideration prominent female lawyers who are not functioning as attorneys, which explains the absence from the list of such powerful figures as First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky.

Rex Bossert, Margaret Cronin Fisk, Jeni Gallagher, Andrew Dunn and Nancy Lackman also contributed to this project.

This article is reprinted with permission from the March 30, 1998 edition of THE NATIONAL LAW JOURNAL. © 1998 NLP IP Company. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information, contact American Lawyer Media, Reprint Department at 800-888-8300 x6111. #005-02-04-0007