

USF WOMEN LAWYERS CELEBRATE AND INSPIRE AFTER 30 YEARS OF TRAILBLAZING

By Deborah Rosenthal, Shareholder, Simmons Hanly Conroy

The mood was festive and the crowd animated on June 2, 2015, when approximately 70 people gathered at Nixon Peabody's San Francisco office to participate in the USF Women Lawyers Committee panel presentation and networking reception, "USF Women Lawyers Committee Celebrating 30 Years, Still Blazing Trails."

The event commemorated the Committee's 30th Anniversary and raised \$24,160 for the Scholarship for Transitional Students, a partial tuition grant that the Committee has awarded every year since 1987.

Several of the group's founders were present, including Susan Mendelsohn and Presiding Justice Barbara Jones of the First Appellate District, California Court of Appeal, who both spoke on the panel. Ann Miller, USF '70, who has been involved with the Committee for more than a decade, moderated.

Justice Jones described her path from teacher—"one of the few 'gender appropriate' careers out there when I graduated college in 1965"—to first female Presiding Justice in the First Appellate District, an appointment that she received in 1998. Justice Jones worked for a Congressman in Washington DC in 1970, when protests over the Vietnam War were erupting. The vitality of law, politics, and activism during that time inspired her to go to law school. She graduated from USF in 1974 and spent the next four decades on a meteoric career path from lawyer to superior court judge to appellate justice, serving on several advisory and planning committees for the California Supreme Court Judicial Council along the way.

"I got where I am on the shoulders of other women, mentors whom I looked to for guidance on everything," Justice Jones said. Male mentors also played a role, as Justice Jones recounted her early days in a corporate law firm, where senior associates took her aside and said: "Barbara, louder."

"The most important take away for me, what has carried the day, is: personal credibility and personal integrity. Your word is your bond. You don't promise what you can't deliver," Justice Jones said.

Justice Jones also advised the attorneys and law students present to make time for hobbies and recreational interests. "Fitness and family come first," she said.

Susan Mendelsohn, Class of '80, one of the Committee's founders and its first President, explained that "a successful lawyer must be nimble and able to adjust with grace. Your firm could merge, your client could merge or go into bankruptcy, partners leave, partners die.... You have to always be in a position to land on your feet," she said.

Mendelsohn spent her legal career practicing labor and employment law with Pillsbury Madison & Sutro, before retiring from the practice of law in late 1999 and spending the next 12 years as an Adjunct Law Professor at USF, coordinating the International LLM Mentor Program.

Mendelsohn also emphasized the importance of mentors and noted that she had developed strong, lasting ties with a number of male mentors. She cautioned against the limitations involved in reaching out only to other women.

The three other speakers on the panel brought diverse perspectives to the discussion from their roles as in-house counsel, public interest advocacy director, and corporate law firm shareholder.

Wendi Hardigg Okun, Class of '94, is a senior attorney in the legal department of Microsoft. She went to law school following six years in the international Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in France. Knowing from day one that she wanted to spend her career in-house, Okun successfully set about making that happen, despite being academically disqualified at the end of her first year of law school. Okun diligently worked to get back on track by ignoring the naysayers, listening to the USF law professors who “nurtured my dream,” and joining professional networks like the USF Law School Board of Governors.

Okun credits her success to “staying grounded while still blazing trails, being true to myself, and giving back.” Connection to community, including the USF community, has been paramount. “I’m very sentimental about the institutions that helped me,” she says.

Trailblazer Juhu Thukral, Class of '96, spoke about the “very many barriers” women face, in their careers and elsewhere, including subtle barriers that often go unnoticed. Thukral is uniquely well positioned to observe these challenges, having spent her legal career advocating for the rights of women, girls, and LGBTQ people, in the areas of sexual rights, gender-based violence, economic opportunity, and criminal justice.

After law school, Thukral moved to New York City and began working for the Urban Justice Center. There she founded the Sex Workers Project and co-founded the New York Anti-Trafficking Network. She currently serves as Director of Law and Advocacy at The Opportunity Agenda, a nonprofit organization focused on shaping the public message surrounding social justice issues.

For Thukral, success and satisfaction in her own career, and advancement of the success and satisfaction of other women in their careers and lives, are one and the same. “It’s important to focus on solutions at the systematic level, the advocacy level, and the personal level, and to do what we can, on each of those levels, every day,” she said. “Time and money are scarce resources. Always keep balancing things, doing excellent work—and amplifying it.”

Although coming from a career on the opposite side of the spectrum, Mary E. Wright, USF '89, who until recently was a shareholder at Ogletree Deakins in San Francisco, agreed that merging the personal and professional is ultimately the key to success in both.

“Great rewards come from just being yourself,” she said. “Don’t ‘fake it til you make it.’ If you are going to fake anything, fake your confidence. Otherwise, be genuine.”

Wright acknowledged the barrier of bias, including not only gender bias but generational bias that can hold young women lawyers back. Biases can be overcome, however, if you “work to establish yourself as an individual, without reference to classification.”

“The greatest strides I have made are when I genuinely connected with a colleague or client. Express your own ideas and speak up for what concerns you, what you feel passionate about,” Wright said.

Participants received a copy of “A History of Women at USF School of Law, Including the USF Women Lawyers Committee and its Scholarship for Transitional Students.” This handout can be accessed at: <http://bit.ly/women-history-usf>.