

# Long Island Business News

## First ladies of the law

By: Bernadette Starzee March 19, 2014 0



**Lois Schlissel**

When Lois Carter Schlissel was named managing attorney of Meyer, Suozzi, English & Klein in 2001, she was widely credited with being the first woman to hold the top management role at a major Long Island law firm. “Our firm broke the glass ceiling,” said Schlissel, still at the helm of the 65-attorney Garden City firm. “I was privileged to be a part of that.” Five of Meyer Suozzi’s 17 practice groups are currently chaired by women, and it’s

not the only firm emphasizing a feminine touch. **Annamarie Bondi-Stoddard, for instance, became managing attorney at nine-attorney Lake Success firm Pegalis & Erickson in 1986 and continues to lead the firm**

**today.** But female managing partners remain few and far between on Long Island, and in the law profession as a whole. Of the top 200 firms in the country, just 4 percent have a firm-wide female managing partner, according to a 2012 report by the National Association of Women Lawyers. Locally, at least, it’s not for a lack of opportunity, according to Schlissel. “Women have great opportunities to advance in the legal profession,” she said. “In the New York area, there are some very important initiatives to assist them.” Schlissel cited the women’s group in the Association of Corporate Counsel Greater New York Chapter, where she sits on the steering committee. Despite such initiatives, the scarcity of women at the helm remains – part of a larger law firm attrition trend, according to Denise Pursley, who was managing partner of the Jericho office of national firm Nixon Peabody for three years before being promoted in 2012 to lead the firm-wide real estate practice. “About the same number of women as men are graduating from law school and starting out as law firm associates,” she said. “But as they progress in their profession, for a variety of reasons, women tend to leave law firms.” Corporations view firms like Nixon Peabody “essentially as training ground for their in-house counsel,” Pursley said. “Many corporations are focused on diversity, and well-trained women lawyers are recruited away from law firms.” In-house positions often allow better work/life balance, which appeals to many women who are juggling family commitments. Women who do stay at law firms are much more likely than men to work part-time or on a flexible schedule while raising their children, which may delay advancement. “It doesn’t take them off track, but it does diminish intangibles, like the opportunity to interact with firm management because you have to juggle time commitments,” Pursley said.

On her way to becoming managing partner, Pursley always worked full-time, except for two maternity leaves. Jennifer Cona had her own Manhattan elder law practice before merging it into what is now called Genser Dubow Genser & Cona about 15 years ago. She joined the Melville firm as a partner and head of the elder law division and is now managing partner. “It takes a lot of time, energy and determination to become managing partner, and you have to give up other things, like family time,” Cona said. “I worked 16 hours a day and seven days a week while I was building my practice, but I was able to do it before starting my family.” As her elder law practice grew in importance to the firm, Cona naturally progressed into the managing partner role. In addition to helping build Meyer Suozzi’s commercial litigation practice into one of Long Island’s largest, Schlissel launched and grew the firm’s

employment practice, which she continues to chair in addition to her managing partner duties. **Bondi-Stoddard, who focuses her practice on medical malpractice law, began her career at Pegalis & Erickson. “I was given a large caseload immediately, and I was a quick learner,” she said.** Pursley believes that many of the skills that have made her an effective real estate attorney – such as those needed to negotiate a lease or move ahead with a deal – have translated well to the management role. “Law firm partners can be an opinionated group, and whenever you have intelligent, motivated people, it takes a special skill set to bring them together,” she said. “You can have robust debates but at the end of the day you have to be able to identify those common goals and execute them.” A managing partner must have integrity and credibility, Schlissel said. “What our clients are interested in and expect is excellent counsel and excellent results – they are not focused on gender,” she said.



**Jennifer Cona**



**Annamarie Bondi-Stoddard**

However, many clients like and expect their law firm to have women – and minorities – in management roles, Pursley noted. “Our clients are very committed to diversity, and they likewise want their counsel and others they do business with to mirror them in their diversity efforts,” she said. Cona said firms headed by a woman may be more focused on family and community issues, which can benefit the firm. “We have family-friendly benefits and we are invested in doing charity work as a group, which promotes camaraderie among the team,” she said. “We also treat clients like family, which is especially important in the elder law area, in which there is an emotional piece in addition to the legal. We always say to ourselves, ‘If this were my parents, what would I do?’ **Women are natural multitaskers, Bondi-Stoddard said. “We have to take care of the home and office and be able to switch gears and take care of a variety of people’s needs,” she said. “It lends to being able to deal with different responsibilities and attorneys and staff.”** Woman managing partners also serve as role models for up-and-coming female attorneys. “The success of women in our profession is a testament to the generations of women who came before us and were inspiring and energizing to those of us who followed them,” Schlissel said. Still, she said, the best way to assist young attorneys – male or female – is to give them “plenty of opportunities to shine, with good work assignments and introductions to clients and community leaders.”