

Celebrating Women in Leadership and the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment

By Kelly M. Rabalais



Celebrating women in leadership seems

fitting as we mark the 100th anniversary of the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution this month (ratified on Aug. 18, 1920). We honor the dedicated, steadfast women leaders who persevered through decades of protests to obtain the passage of the 19th Amendment, wherein women were granted the right to vote. The most notable figures in the women's suffrage movement were Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone. Some argue that the women's suffrage movement lasted 100 years but most agree the effort started in earnest at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. For

at least 72 years, many women leaders fought a peaceful but unrelenting fight for the right to vote, inspiring women for decades to come. Today's women leaders of our Bar are just as impressive.

As I thought about women in leadership throughout history, it did not take long to connect the many dots to the awe-inspiring accomplishments of the women of the Louisiana Bar, many of whom have held leadership positions while reaching these achievements. It is imperative to remember how far women have come since obtaining the right to vote. However, discussing the authentic trials and triumphs of current women leaders of our Bar is equally important. It is a privilege to pay homage to the following women who have heeded the

call of leadership and provide a real-life example of just how far women can go.

Attorneys across Louisiana and beyond have taken notice of the convergence of three particular women, who currently hold (or recently held) major leadership positions in our profession. Bernette Joshua Johnson continues to serve as chief justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. Her legendary service remains to be the most concrete example of authentic leadership in our state. Judy Perry Martinez served as the 2019-20 president of the American Bar Association and Alainna R. Mire is the 2020-21 president of the Louisiana State Bar Association. These women are living, breathing examples of what it means to be distinguished leaders.

(Left) American Bar Association President Judy Perry Martinez, Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson and LSBA President Alainna R. Mire. Photo by Matthew Hinton Photography.



Three Louisiana Supreme Court Justices, from left, Justice Jeannette Theriot Knoll, now retired; Chief Justice Catherine D. Kimball, now retired; and current Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson. Photo provided by Louisiana Supreme Court.

Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson

Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson is the first African-American chief justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court and only the second female chief justice to serve. She was the first woman elected to the bench of Orleans Parish Civil District Court in 1984. The word “trailblazer” does not even begin to embody the depths of her public service or the value of her success in the legal profession. The number of awards and honors bestowed upon her are voluminous and warranted. Two notable awards were bestowed by the American Bar Association (ABA). In 1998, she received the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers Achievement Award. She also was recognized with the 2010 Spirit of Excellence Award from the ABA’s Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity.

Several themes traverse Chief Justice Johnson’s career and accolades, such as her dedication to representing the underserved and ensuring fairness across many social justice arenas. Her ability to con-

nect and embed these moral foundations to the practice of law is one accomplishment that will last forever.

When I spoke to Chief Justice Johnson, she was passionate about how paramount the passage of the 19th Amendment was to setting women on a course of leadership. In her own words, she expressed how the work of women leaders is a marathon, a journey of steady work over many years. Further, she reiterated the importance of paying homage to the women who have stood up to fight for equal rights.

Chief Justice Johnson provided these inspiring words: “This 100th anniversary of women’s right to vote was not easily won. It was the result of a hard-fought battle in which many women sacrificed, suffered, yet succeeded in pursuit of having their voices heard and their votes counted. Voting is the most basic expression of participation and equality in our democracy. Our legal system is a key

component of our democracy, and the law plays a critical role in shaping our democracy. It forms the cornerstone of our civilization and helps to maintain order and ensure fairness. I joined the field of law in September 1969, a time when it was almost unthinkable that a black woman could not only become a lawyer, but to then be elected to the Civil District Court bench in Orleans Parish and to eventually become the 25th Chief Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. I am proud to say that, in my chosen profession, I am in excellent company with hundreds, even thousands, of women judges around Louisiana and the nation who believe that anything is possible if you are willing and obedient to fight the good fight of faith.”

Chief Justice Johnson acknowledged many historical women leaders and how they paved the way for her success today. She emphasized, “Without women such as suffragists and judges Susan B. Anthony, Constance Baker Motley, Catherine D. Kimball, Jeannette T. Knoll, Anna Veters Levy, Joan Bernard Armstrong, Sandra Day O’Connor, Gertrude B. Rush and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the last 100 years of progress would have looked strikingly different. Their work helped to change how women were viewed by society as a whole and, therefore, how they were treated under the law. It is undeniable that women have not only left their mark in the legal profession, but they have also created a victorious legacy of accomplishment. These are women who have not only *endured* but *were endowed* with the influence and innovation to not only conquer but also overcome every impeding obstacle. They ran the race, which some may have defined as a ‘sprint,’ but has proven to be a ‘marathon.’ We learned that we were predestined to not just survive but to thrive. I am humbled to stand alongside so many influential and accomplished women in law.”

From the sidelines, it is truly inspiring to observe our Chief Justice in action as a woman leader. I can only hope to gain some insight from her experiences in an effort to do my part.

Judy Perry Martinez



Judy Perry Martinez, ABA President.

Judy Perry Martinez served as 2019-20 president of the American Bar Association (ABA). Much attention has been given to her installation as president of the ABA and rightfully so. Representing the Louisiana legal profession in such a prestigious position is profound in and of itself. But, serving during the 100th anniversary of the adoption of the 19th Amendment is worthy of pause and acknowledgement of the significance. She also set the standard, serving as the first female ABA president from the state of Louisiana. A review of Martinez’s résumé reveals she has been a steady and successful practitioner in the civil arena with Simon, Peragine, Smith & Redfearn, L.L.P., and as counsel for Northrop Grumman for more than 30 years. In addition to the many leadership positions she has held with the ABA, she also has served in several positions with the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) and the New Orleans Bar Association.

In 2017, Martinez received the LSBA’s David A. Hamilton Lifetime Achievement Award and the New Orleans Bar Association’s Presidents’ Award. In 2012, she received the Camille Gravel Pro Bono Award from the New Orleans Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. She is also the recipient of the 1998 Michaelle Pitard Wynne Professionalism Award from the Association of Women Attorneys. The awards are many and thread a common theme of dedication to social justice and equality for all. She illustrated this theme and her own personal social responsibility during her installation as president of the ABA. She said, “Our finest moments and most enduring contributions have been when we have used our voice and resources for causes about which we can act with authority, and which we can influence with impact. As lawyers, we know equality. We know liberty. And we know justice.” This specific quote emerged above all others when I read her speech. These words are inspiring and give insight into the type of leader the Louisiana Bar is honored to have in Martinez.

Alainna R. Mire



Alainna R. Mire, LSBA President. Photo by Sarah Boehringer, Kinetix.

Alainna R. Mire is another Louisiana woman leader worthy of recognition. Mire was installed as Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) president in June. She is the fifth woman to serve as president and the youngest woman to serve in LSBA history. She is the chief resilience officer and an assistant attorney for the City of Alexandria, where she was the former human resources director.

Anyone who knows Mire is very familiar with her many terms of service in various positions for the LSBA. She served as LSBA secretary and *Louisiana Bar Journal* editor from 2015-17. She also served as LSBA Young Lawyers Division chair, chair-elect, secretary and District 6 representative. She served on the LSBA's Board of Governors as House of Delegates Liaison Committee chair.

Mire has already served in several LSBA leadership positions and is now serving amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which will present many challenges. From her proven track of service and leadership to our Bar, I know we are in good hands. It is important for our profession to have a woman president given that women still only make up a third of licensed attorneys in Louisiana. Hopefully, with Mire's leadership and success as an example, we will see more women enter the practice.

More Women Legal Leaders

These three women on their own paint a remarkable picture of leadership in the legal profession but they represent just the tip of the iceberg. As I began my research for this article, I learned about a plethora of other women leaders in our profession. I also became reacquainted with several familiar women leaders.

In the aftermath of the 2010 BP oil spill, I crossed paths with Judge Nannette Jolivet Brown, chief judge for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana and the current president of the New Orleans Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. At that time, she was the city attorney for New Orleans. For the last 10 years, she has been gracious enough to spend her time working with local bar associations.

One of my most memorable experiences with Judge Brown was when she led a discussion with the Covington Bar Association's Women in Law Section, which I chaired. Judge Brown's insight into what it means to be a woman leader in the legal profession resonates with me today. I asked her about the qualities women possess that contribute to their success. She said, "I consider some attributes of women leaders that lead to their success to be the ability to develop positive and supportive relationships and partnerships with people across various industries, which support their field of expertise, and who are at various stages in their career. Another important attribute is the ability to communicate clearly and effectively with a variety of people, thereby gaining their trust, support and confidence."

Perhaps Judge Brown's most compelling example of what it takes to be a woman leader is not by her words but by her continued leadership and actions. We can learn a lot from her journey. When I asked her about lessons she learned throughout her career which prepared her for leadership, she explained, "I have learned the importance of being a good listener, planning ahead and not being

afraid of failure. I have learned to listen carefully to those around me, even when I disagree with a comment or complaint. I have learned to figure out whether it provides some insight into what I can do differently to further engage someone or incorporate their point of view in my decision making."

Judge Brown gave solid advice on recognizing and embracing leadership opportunities when they are presented. She said, "I am always thinking ahead and planning ahead. You can miss a lot of opportunities life may have to offer by being afraid to reach out because you think you might fail and dread the consequences of failure. Be prepared for opportunities you may feel are beyond you. You have to be open to opportunities and not be afraid to take some risks or you may not even see unconventional opportunities when they are right before your very eyes."

As women, we often find comfort in seeking guidance from other women for perspective on careers and leadership. I asked Judge Brown about the best advice she received about leadership and she told me, "If you find yourself having to tell people you are supposed to be leading that you are in charge, either by specifically articulating the words 'I'm the boss' or wielding your power over those you are supposed to be leading, you have failed as a leader. Some leadership roles take work to develop, particularly when you are leading high-level management personnel or peers in general. Do your job well. Treat people fairly. And communicate openly and clearly."

While on the topic of women leaders in the federal courts, it is worth noting that the current chief judge of the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals is Chief Judge Priscilla R. Owen.

Two of the three chief judges of the Louisiana United States District Courts are also female. Aside from Judge Brown, there is Chief Judge Shelly D.

Dick of the Middle District, who was the first female judge appointed to the Middle District.

Three of the five chief judges of the Louisiana Courts of Appeal are female. They are Chief Judge Vanessa Guidry-Whipple of the 1st Circuit, Chief Judge Felicia Toney Williams of the 2nd Circuit and Chief Judge Susan M. Chehardy of the 5th Circuit.

Also, 73 of the state district judges are women. Also of particular interest, Anne Simon sits on three of four designated Indian Nation courts in Louisiana.

In 2019, Judge Bernadette D'Souza of Orleans Parish Civil District Court served as the president of the National Association of Women Judges.

This record-breaking trend is consistent with women emerging in leadership on a national level. The 2016 congressional elections were dubbed "The Year of the Woman," with more women qualifying for office than any other year. Currently, more women hold seats in the House and Senate than ever before.

Women are making strides in the corporate arena as well. The number of female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies is the highest ever. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of an impressive movement and it is a thrilling time to be a woman in the professional sector.

Reflections on Leadership

Reflecting on the many women leaders who I have encountered in 20 years of practice, I would be remiss not to mention Patricia (Pat) LeBlanc. For years, she was one of just a few women to represent major automotive manufacturers and Japanese insurers in Louisiana. She was the lead defense attorney for products liability and vehicle warranty cases across the state. She was one of the founding members of the Jefferson Chamber and served as chair. She also served as chair of GNO, Inc. and remains on the board of directors. Jefferson Parish President Cynthia Lee Sheng asked LeBlanc to serve on her

campaign committee and LeBlanc assisted with the transition team. These are only a few highlights of LeBlanc's many accomplishments and leadership roles throughout her career.

LeBlanc hired me immediately out of law school as a "baby lawyer," or so she called me. Over eight years, she trained and mentored me with much patience and discipline. She was a mother of four and a full-time litigator, who was also deeply committed to many civic organizations. She is the most personal example I have of what it means to be a woman in leadership.

When I asked LeBlanc for her thoughts on women leaders in the legal profession, she did not hesitate to explain her perspective. Her philosophy was simple. She believed that the more you have to do, the more you get done. Women traditionally juggle the many duties associated with being a wife, mother and lawyer all at the same time. We classically take on too much and we have trouble saying "no." She concluded that, if the result of all of this juggling is that women make it to leadership positions, then that is *lagniappe*.

LeBlanc believes that women have a duty to be involved in our communities, and as lawyers, that duty is heightened. I think it is safe to say that the environment has changed a bit from the time of LeBlanc's early years as an attorney. One glaring observation about the legal profession today is that there is a broader sense of acceptance and collegiality of female lawyers, which was not prevalent when she entered the practice in 1983. This is in stark contrast to her early days. Often she was the only woman in court on rule day and the sole female trying cases. Over the course of her career, she has certainly illustrated what it means for women to pave a path to success while overcoming obstacles that are directly related to being a woman in our profession.

Conclusion

Women were given more than the right to vote with the adoption of the

19th Amendment. They were given the freedom to dream about a bigger and brighter future. With that, they were given the opportunity to become leaders. Without the actions taken by the leaders of the women's suffrage movement, we would not be able to celebrate the women leaders in this article.

Many of these women would say that becoming a leader was not their main motivation for devoting their time and passion to their profession and outside interests. Rather, achieving leadership roles was simply a culmination of their continued efforts over many years. Notoriety or fanfare doesn't drive these women. That is obvious. They are motivated by the satisfaction that comes from working hard, giving back to their community, and insisting on excellence in their profession. I think the leaders of women's suffrage would be proud that their efforts were so well worth it. More importantly, they would be grateful for the continued efforts of today's women leaders. I know I am!

As women, we share the responsibility and the honor of maintaining this progression. As Chief Justice Johnson aptly put it, women are on a marathon to breaking records and reaching new heights. We must all look within and ask ourselves if we are carrying the torch of leadership, whatever that means to each of us; if not, know that it is never too late to start. So, to all women attorneys and future leaders, here's to the next 100 years!

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