

LSBA's Women Presidents:

Perspectives on Leadership, the Legal Profession and the 19th Amendment

When Alainna R. Mire was sworn in as the 80th president of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) in June, she became the fifth Louisiana woman attorney to serve in this leadership role. In this year, as the nation celebrates the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Aug. 18, 1920) — guaranteeing all women the right to vote — the *Louisiana Bar Journal* thought it fitting to gather perspectives from these

extraordinary women on leadership (in general), LSBA leadership (in particular), reflections on the 19th Amendment, or a combination of all three topics.

In her President's Interview (beginning on page 79), Mire discusses her progression through various leadership roles in the LSBA and credits those who contributed to her success along the way. She also talks about her "vision for the future," including a focus on diversity, inclusion and technology.

Read on for perspectives from Marta-Ann Schnabel, Hon. Elizabeth Emy Foote, Kim M. Boyle and Dona Kay Renegar.

Just for the Past 14 Years...



By Marta-Ann
Schnabel
2006-07 LSBA
President

Women have been voting for 100 years. Yet, women have only had the opportunity to be Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) president for the past 14 years.

My stint as LSBA president broke a ceiling, but it is worth remembering that the barrier was in place until 2006 — even with 86 years of alleged wholesale enfranchisement as a backdrop. This alone would seem to challenge the premise that the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage is a tribute to women leaders. Indeed, I was amused to learn that the first woman was elected (by Montana men) to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1917. She was prevented from voting for herself, but it did not stand in the way of serving her constituents, of taking on a role which she felt to be important, in short, of her leadership.

Running for LSBA president was the natural progression of my belief in our profession and my work on the Board of Governors. It was not a goal unto itself. I did not set out to be a "woman leader," much less the "first woman president." Still, I was not so naïve as to think nothing of being the "first." It was only as the point was emphasized by others that I realized the impact. When it was mentioned each time I was introduced, I felt less the "woman leader" and more the carnival attraction. But Kim Boyle admonished me to embrace the characterization — that my obligation was to those who came behind me. Nothing is worse, she said, than a "first" who fails. What I did not know as I accepted her advice was what would follow — that keeping the association from imploding over financial woes and management issues in the immediate aftermath of Katrina and Rita would test my reserves of willpower and tenacity.

Would there have been as many challenges had I been a man? More than likely. Would the solutions have been as effective? Maybe. But I was able to offer a viewpoint not shared by the 65 men who came before me. The Nobel Prize-winning author, Doris Lessing, in explanation/defense of her acclaimed 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*, wrote that "this attempt on my part assumed that that filter which is a woman's way of looking at life has the same validity as the filter which is a man's way." Mind you, I was all of 5 years old when her book was published, but I stumbled upon it 12 years later, and this lesson has never left me.

It seems unlikely that Alainna Mire's leadership has its origins in the history surrounding the 19th Amendment. Rather, in the context of historical struggles, it's a fair assumption that her forebears, male and female, would have been challenged with limited access to the voting booth until the mid-1960s (or later) and the advent of the Voting Rights Act. In honoring Alainna as a woman in the context of what is essentially white women's history, I wonder if we are not leaving a great deal unsaid about the struggle of women of color in Louisiana? Particularly small-town and rural Louisiana? I wonder, but I cannot say for sure. It is up to Alainna to tell us, to include this piece of her in her leadership.

Here is what I do know about Alainna: her life and practice experiences are unique, unlike those of any LSBA president who has come before her. She will grow the organization and its future leadership by example and experience.

And here is what I honor as I watch younger women rise in this profession: they do not need anyone to tell them that the filter with which they view the world is as valid as a man's. Occasionally I hear from younger women who think of me as a mentor, but mostly I am just a cheerleader. They are confident in themselves and in their talents. In truth, I have much to learn from them, and I relish the opportunity to do so.

Links Between the 19th and 13th Amendments



By Hon. Elizabeth Erny Foote
2008-09 LSBA President

What inspires me most about the 19th Amendment is the women who fought for that right. How brave must they have been in 1848 to put their names on the Declaration of Sentiments in Seneca Falls, NY. They faced personal attacks and public shaming. And it took another 70 years of brave women to finally achieve the amendment's ratification.

Of course, it takes a long time for societal attitudes to catch up to the law. One hundred years after the amendment's ratification, women and men are not treated equally in our country. And we are not talking about personal slights here. We are talking about discrimination that hurts a woman's pocketbook and her health.

Likewise, the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865. But our society has yet to catch up with the concept that Black people are equal. And that discrimination is far worse than what a well-educated white woman like me endures or can imagine. For me to talk of discrimination must sound like childish whining.

But there is a link between the 19th Amendment and the 13th Amendment, not just conceptually but historically. Many of the women who attended the Seneca Falls Convention were abolitionists. Frederick Douglass was allowed entry on the second day (no men allowed on the first day!) and spoke passionately in favor of a woman's right to vote.

Lawyers are uniquely positioned to change not just the law, but society's attitudes. As president of your Bar, I witnessed firsthand the brave lawyers who fought for access to our courts for poor people and who tirelessly gave their services to the victims of those evil twin sisters Katrina and Rita. We must join the brave people who today risk those personal attacks and public shaming to help our country live up to the language of its laws.

Our new President Alainna Mire will provide the leadership for that challenge.

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants



By Kim M. Boyle
2009-10 LSBA President

In looking back to my election and swearing in as the first African-American female president of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA), I remain honored by the privilege of representing the then-21,000 members of our association and meeting and working with so many of our members across the state.

However, in having the opportunity to serve in this role, I recognize that I stood, and continue to stand, on the shoulders of many giants, some known, but many unknown. These brilliant, exceptional and trail-blazing lawyers and judges who were precluded from participating as leaders in our bar association because of their gender and, in many instances, their race, have been the inspiration for so many of us to try to break down as many barriers as possible and to be leaders and contributors in the bar and in our communities. As the late, great Olympian Wilma Rudolph said, "Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. The potential for greatness lives within each of us."

In going back to my tenure as LSBA president in 2009-10, I would be remiss if I did not recognize Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson, who is serving in her last year as Chief Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. Chief Justice Johnson has spent her entire legal career as a trailblazer and her career as a jurist has been marked with distinction and exemplary performance, thereby opening the doors to many minority and female attorneys to follow in her footsteps. As one of those "giants" upon whose shoulders I have stood, Chief Justice Johnson has served as a mentor and role model for hundreds of women and African-American lawyers in Louisiana as well as around the country; the list of lawyers and judges that the Chief has mentored is literally endless.

So in recognizing the phenomenal women who have served as LSBA president — Marta-Ann Schnabel, our dynamic first trail-blazing female president; Judge Beth Foote, a model of professionalism and is now a federal judge; Dona Renegar, who brought so much dedication to the bar; and now Alainna Mire, the second African-American female president of the LSBA, who is faced with leading the bar through a global pandemic, but will be a strong and courageous leader during this time — I am reminded of the words of Chief Justice Johnson in addressing what female judges in general and what a female Supreme Court Chief Justice bring to the judiciary. In 2013, Chief Justice Johnson said this and it still holds true seven years later: "Just diversity. I think we need women lawyers. We need representation from every sector. I think we benefit from a diverse legal profession. We benefit from a diverse judiciary because we all bring different experiences to the table."

I am honored to be a member of this association and look forward to serving under the leadership of our new LSBA President Alainna Mire.

Leadership Advice for Those Next in Line



By Dona Kay Renegar
2017-18 LSBA President

When describing a colleague, sometimes people use the phrase “natural leader.” That term is often associated with qualities possessed by those in power such as teachers, civic leaders, first responders, etc. “Natural leaders” are often described as such because they are determined, decisive, aggressive and focused. In my 27 years of practicing law, I have noticed that many young leaders tend to mimic those qualities, assuming they are necessary to be a successful leader, but this assumption is not necessarily grounded in fact. While many of the qualities listed above can be useful, depending on the situation, there are as many leadership styles as there are people on this planet and all of them can be equally successful.

The most successful leaders are passionate about their work, authentic and empathetic in their relation to people and goals, and they prioritize the best interests of the organization over themselves.

Find something that interests you

and have a purpose. The most persuasive leaders are those who feel passionately about the organization, its purpose and people. That passion helps you establish and articulate a reason for wanting to lead a change in direction of the organization, creating additional services, or meeting new needs. People look to leaders for direction, creativity and growth. If you clearly determine and communicate the reason and basis of the direction in which you see the group headed, you can better persuade and unify those around you to work toward the same goal. When people believe in the rationale behind your goals, they are motivated to work toward those goals with you.

Lead with energy, dedication and direction and others will follow. Engaging others to work with you toward a common goal creates and encourages ownership and fosters dedication in those who follow your example. Think less about telling people what to do and more about the goals to be achieved. The group is then engaged in the journey and may suggest ideas about how to reach that goal. Be open to discussions about different paths to success. There is more than one way to skin a cat.

Know your strengths and weaknesses and embrace them. Be self-aware as a leader and know where your talents are and know those skills that could use improvement. This allows you to more fairly assess your own performance as a leader and identify those individuals who can offer support in areas where you are weaker. Building a team fully equipped to move toward a common goal increases the chance of success and can help make you stronger in those areas in which you need to improve your effectiveness and performance as a leader.

Focus on your fiduciary duties and others will follow suit. Lead with an eye toward what is best for the organization and not what is best for any individual. Remind your team of the common goal and help focus discussions toward achieving that goal. This sometimes involves making difficult de-

cisions. Be ready to face those and have a well-founded reason for them, and others will follow suit.

Do not be afraid to use both sides of your brain to relate to people and issues. Listen carefully to the ideas, concerns and goals of the members of the organization. Relate to the leadership team and try to understand their motivation and empathize with their positions. Validate their efforts and sincerely appreciate their contributions. People need to feel heard. As a leader, listen more than talk. Collaborate with colleagues on moving the organization forward as opposed to telling them what to do and how to do it.

Keep your eyes open for potential leaders and nurture their efforts. The organization is best served when you cultivate and encourage new leadership. Keep an eye toward individuals who need to be invited to become a leader, not just those who gravitate toward leadership positions. Part of leading an organization means looking toward the future to ensure that those coming behind you can continue the path forward toward growth and accomplishment. When mentoring new leaders, constructively criticize in private and commend in public.

Recognize commitment, creativity and achievement in those around you. Do not hesitate to recognize the excellent work of your colleagues and do so publicly and frequently. People will become more motivated and engaged when their accomplishments are recognized. Leading by example encourages others in the organization to recognize outstanding contributions by employees and colleagues. Give credit where credit is due.

In sum, when it comes to leadership, there is more than one path to success. Playing to your strengths and knowing your weaknesses are the keys to truly effective leadership. And keeping an eye on the future and an open mind about the types of leaders who can carry the organization's vision further is the best way to ensure continuing success.