

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 163, No. 230

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

Firm celebrates wins by women in first chair job

Leadership positions haven't kept pace with number of women entering legal profession

BY **JORDYN REILAND**
Law Bulletin staff writer

The number of women in leadership roles has remained small across the profession, but one firm is enjoying — and celebrating — the successes its female attorneys have brought as first chairs at trial.

Despite more women entering the legal profession, representation in management positions in cases and at firms has lagged. A research report conducted by the American Bar Association randomly sampled cases filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois in 2013. They found just 13 percent of cases had only women appearing as lead counsel, compared to 59 percent of cases where lead counsel seats were solely filled by men.

Similarly, 21 percent of the cases studied had all-female trial teams, compared to 58 percent with all-male teams.

Johnson & Bell Ltd. can attest to the successes female-led trial teams can bring.

Last month, Johnson & Bell attorneys Sammi L. Renken and Sharon L. Stanzione served as lead trial attorneys and secured defense verdicts for their respective clients in multimillion medical-malpractice lawsuits.

Renken, 42, has been with the firm since 2001. She also serves as the chair of the firm's Women's Initiative, an organization established to provide training, mentorship and networking opportunities for female attorneys in the firm.

Renken said she hopes initiatives such as these help groom the next generation of female first chairs.

"My 8-year-old daughter says that she wants to be a lawyer when she grows up, which makes me so

proud," Renken said. "I am focused on doing all I can so that all doors are open for her, and it is no longer a rarified thing to be a female first chair."

Of the 57 Johnson & Bell shareholders, 11 are women. Of those 11, more than half have handled trials as first chairs. All five of the female equity shareholders and three of the six female income shareholders have first-chair trial experience.

When Stanzione, 46, started her career roughly two decades ago, the firm where she worked had one female partner. The 46-year-old now practices medical-malpractice litigation out of a Johnson & Bell office in Indiana.

A lot has changed since she got started, she said.

"It's a very exciting time, especially thinking from when I came up [into the profession,]" Stanzione said. "There's nothing that can hold women back now."

Margaret "Peggy" Unger, who joined the firm in 1979, has tried more than 35 civil cases to verdict. After losing the first two, she has not lost since.

"Trial law is a good career choice for women lawyers because courtrooms provide a level playing field," the 63-year-old said. "The trial judge is there to provide a fair trial."

Unger was among the first female trial attorneys, trying her first case four years after being licensed as a lawyer.

Her continued success didn't come without a lot of hard work, she said.

"The role of first chair carries a high degree of accountability and responsibility that many lawyers, male and female, never reach," she said.



From left, Johnson & Bell shareholders Peggy Unger, Sharon Stanzione, Katie Gorrie (seated) and Sammi Renken. Photo provided by Johnson & Bell Ltd.

Unger said one of the challenges any young lawyer faces in becoming a first chair is getting his or her own clients. Another is managing the time commitment necessary to be primarily responsible for preparing and trying a case to a verdict, she said.

"Life circumstances sometimes interfere with career goals, particularly so with women," she said.

"My 8-year-old daughter says that she wants to be a lawyer when she grows up, which makes me so proud."

Katie E. Gorrie, 41, obtained summary judgment in March on a construction negligence claim filed against her client, a large general contractor in Illinois.

She also served as moderator of a panel discussion this year titled, "A Woman's Place: Getting in the First Chair," which focused on steps

to increase the disproportionately low percentage of female litigators in lead trial attorney roles.

As an attorney who deals primarily with construction and general negligence, she sees both the legal and construction industry changing for women.

"Just like in the legal realm, the construction industry is striving to have more gender equality, which is good," she said.

Gorrie said there is no secret formula to becoming a successful female trial attorney, just a combination of hard work and showing clients and peers that you can handle any task that comes your way.

That, of course, can be easier said than done when you are first starting out, she said.

"In the beginning being timid is not that unheard of. A lot of times it's just a confidence issue," Gorrie said. "Once you step through that door the only limits are ones that you impose on yourself."

jreiland@lawbulletinmedia.com