

The History of Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo County

By Tara Jacobi

I am a proud member and past President of the Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo County (WLASLO), which was founded in 1981. Our mission back then is what it still is today – the advancement of women in the legal profession and in the community at large. WLASLO membership, open to both women and men, implements this mission through unique traditions and programs, which include the annual Judicial Reception, monthly MCLE and social lunches, mock trial support, a scholarship program, the Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award and affiliation with California Women Lawyers Association.

WLASLO's Beginning

According to our archives – housed in the infamous box which most WLA members have heard about but have never seen, in the 1980's there were fewer than ten women lawyers living and practicing in San Luis Obispo County. There were no women judges. Vastly outnumbered by men, the founding members felt the need to support each other by forming a minority bar association. Donna Beck was the organization's first President followed by Patricia Ashbaugh.

Judicial Reception

As WLASLO President Jan Marx in 1990 recalls: "There was just a handful of women lawyers and not one woman Judge in San Luis Obispo County. Women attorneys faced various intimidating experiences of being seen as the "other" at that point in time. There was a lot of traditional male bonding going on in the legal community, including the County Bar Association committees, social lunches, all male service and fraternal organizations. Some of the more prominent attorneys (all men) would play golf with the Judges (all men) on Wednesday afternoons. The only interaction the few women lawyers had with Judges occurred in the formal and legally constrained context of the courtroom."

She explains further, "The issue presenting me as WLA President was how could women lawyers establish collegial relationships with the Judiciary? The WLA Board and I came up with the idea of an annual Judicial Reception with food and maybe some wine at a local restaurant. It was an instant success! The Judges were pleased to be honored and happy to converse with women lawyers on a casual social basis." Hence our most well-known tradition, the Judicial Reception was born.

At some point, the Judicial Reception developed an opening practice whereby the Judges would share a bit of information about themselves. In 2015, the year I was President, we asked the Judges to share their favorite work of art or painting and why. The audience was left to guess which Judge selected each painting we displayed. Our current President, Meghann Triplett

described this past year's ice breaker as one wherein the Judges were asked to provide the best piece of advice they received and the audience had to guess which Judge the advice was from.

A Woman for Judge

In 1991, in celebration of our tenth anniversary, WLASLO drew attention to the fact that there were still no women on the bench by carrying out the well-publicized campaign, "A Woman for Judge." WLA created an information packet featuring nine highly qualified women who had applied for Judgeship, and it was published in the Telegram Tribune Newspaper. As a result of our advocacy, the Board of Supervisors urged Governor Pete Wilson to appoint a women to the bench. In 1992, WLASLO was happy to welcome the Honorable Teresa Estrada-Mullaney, the first woman Judge in our County. "Today, thirty years later, our local bench is 50-50 men and women. Not to say that WLA had anything to do with that gender sea change, but we are happy to take a bit of credit, " states Jan.

Monthly MCLE Lunches

In 1991, WLASLO also became an MCLE provider and our monthly lunches were birthed. This became an opportunity for members to enjoy lunch, networking and educational presentations. With our Vice President in the lead and input from the board, she usually sets our calendar of MCLE topics for the year. Certain months are loosely reserved for certain types of credit. In March, each year, for example, we tend to offer bias credits relating sometimes to discussions focused on biases against women in the legal profession. In December, each year we tend to offer the ever-coveted ethics credits.

As a WLASLO member for almost a decade, Doug Federman reports, our legal ethics programs are his favorite as they are "thoroughly informative." He also enjoys spending the time with a good group of people. He further recommends that "men should feel comfortable about joining and attending WLA events."

Some more seasoned members like to joke about how our lunches progressed over the years from the backroom of the local noodle restaurant, to a banquet room of an Italian restaurant, and are now hosted in a conference room complete with a power-point screen at a new hotel – The Kinney.

WLASLO Social Lunches

Within the past couple of years, the Board wished to increase its networking opportunities. Each month members are giving the opportunity to meet for a social lunch at a different location, which is now hosted by a rotating board member. Initially, long-time board member Sheryl Wolcott took the lead on this idea.

"One of the things our members enjoy about WLA is simply getting to know people in the legal community, especially those whose practice areas differ from our own. A few years ago, we started WLA "Social Lunches" which are simply a monthly come-if-you-can lunch at a variety of local restaurants, which require no RSVP, and no agenda. This year, the lunches are the third Friday of each month. We e-mail the specific location, date, and time to our membership in advance. Our hope is that each lunch brings a cross-section of members together." – Sheryl Wolcott

Supporters of Mock Trial Competition

According to those achieves, WLASLO can take credit as being the first sponsor in our County of our local schools' Mock Trial Competition. Today many members donate and actively participate in Mock Trials at all educational levels in public schools, Cuesta College and Cal Poly.

WLASLO Scholarship Program

Our Scholarship Program has a long history of providing monetary support to local female residents in their journey through law school. We have been fortunate to have a tireless Committee Chair, Lisa Sperow for the last six years working hard to pay it forward to SLO natives attending law school.

She shared the following. "I truly enjoy my role as scholarship chair because it gives me a chance to meet and learn about all of these amazing law students with connections to our county. Each year I am so impressed by the high caliber of applicants. We tend to have applicants from all backgrounds, ages, and experiences who are dedicated to improving the lives of others through volunteer work, their studies and their professional lives. The hardest part for the scholarship committee is having to pick only 3 or 4 to award with scholarships each year when we'd like to recognize more."

Lisa explains more, "I also enjoy meeting the recipients at the Judicial Reception and hearing how much receiving the scholarship meant to them. One recipient informed me that she was going through a tough time financially and emotionally and was starting to doubt her decision to attend law school because of the sacrifices she and her family were making when our scholarship award letter arrived! She said it felt like a validation and a sign from God that she was doing the right thing. It is also rewarding when recipients, such as Kara Stein-Conaway and Shannon Bio, graduate from law school, become lawyers and eventually join the board of WLA!"

Some of our scholarship recipients had to say the following about receiving scholarships from WLASLO.

"As a San Luis Obispo County native, I appreciate that the scholarship was designed to advance women in the legal field who have connections to San Luis Obispo County. At the time I applied, I was in my first year of school at the Santa Barbara College of Law, working full time, traveling

at night to Santa Barbara for class, and paying for everything with private loans. In addition to the relief the scholarship funds provided, I was also very grateful for the chance to meet local judges and attorneys at the award ceremony, an opportunity which later came to my advantage as it made me feel more comfortable as an attorney myself working with the same people as colleagues.” - Shannon Bio

“Law school was hard. Learning to process information in an entirely new way, sometimes felt overwhelming. Knowing that other women who had been where I was, had made it through law school, and had become practicing attorneys, were selecting me as a scholarship recipient, felt like they were telling me that they had confidence in my abilities and were cheering me on.” – Kara Stein-Conaway.

"Embarking on the journey to attend law school is certainly not something I could have accomplished on my own. As a Central Coast native, it has been a privilege and honor to receive the support and scholarship from the Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo County." -Selene Estrada-Villela

“I have been so honored to receive the WLA scholarship. This scholarship has supported me not only financially, but emotionally. It means the world to me to know that I have a group of women, from my hometown, believing in me and aiding my future. I am forever grateful for being chosen as the WLA scholarship recipient.”- Kaitlyn Enticknap

“I am so incredibly grateful for the financial support from the Women Lawyers Association scholarship. Not only was the money well spent on my education at San Luis Obispo College of Law, but their vote of confidence in me has also been very empowering. Meeting this successful and dynamic group of women at the Judicial Reception was most inspiring. As I near the end of my second year at San Luis Obispo College of Law, I look forward to one day becoming a part of our San Luis Obispo legal community.” - Nicole Mullikin

WLA Awards: Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award / Rising Star Award

In 2012, when I was on the Board discussion arose about the different awards offered to attorneys within our county. Many women were doing amazing things to help other women lawyers or other women in our community. We were hearing about them but why not honor them. There were plenty awards for to recognize trial lawyers or community involvement but we wanted an award which recognized women helping women. The Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award, otherwise known as the OWL Award, honors a law school graduate, with 7 years or more work experience, and with 3 years of those years of work experience in San Luis Obispo County, who is helping other female attorneys or other women advance in our community. That year, who else can come to mind but our first recipient of the OWL Award - Angie King. Thereafter, other OWL Award recipients included: Jacqueline Frederick, Alicia Valdez Wright and Jennifer Alton. This year, Lisa Sperow is our well-deserved recipient of our OWL Award. She is being recognized for leadership as the Executive Director of the Cal Poly Low Income Taxpayer Clinic and toiling in the trenches, for half a dozen years, coordinating our Scholarship

Program. Essentially, she is paying it forward by fundraising and handing out those funds to young women lawyers wishing to find a career in the law. This is us honoring a woman supporting women in the legal profession.

California Women Lawyers (CWL)

WLASLO is affiliated with California Women Lawyers (CWL). This affiliation gives our members the opportunity to learn about cutting edge legal issues, and network with other women lawyers statewide. Previously our board consisted of a board member serving as a liaison between the two organizations. Since 2004, Jacqueline Federick has served in this role up until last year. She shares with us the following.

“One of the most significant experiences of my career was in 2002 when I ran for the position of Superior Court Judge for San Luis Obispo County. On balance it was a wonderful experience from which I learned so much. There was at the time only one female judge on the bench. And although I did not want to make my gender an issue in the campaign, I was surprised at how it did become relevant. It made me realize that gender issues in the legal profession were still a factor and that more needed to continue to be done to ensure that women in the legal profession were treated with equality in position, pay and opportunities to excel professionally. I decided that I could contribute to this by joining the Board of California Women Lawyers (CWL) as the liaison to the Women Lawyers Association of San Luis Obispo. It was an extremely rewarding experience to meet and work with other like-minded women who wanted to make a positive difference for women in the legal community and in society. I am very proud of the many accomplishments of CWL and WLASLO in supporting women in our profession to achieve their highest potential.”

In addition to these events and programs we host, it essentially comes down to the enthusiasm of our members, which makes WLASLO a wonderful organization to take part. Our traditions are distinctive and our committees are purposeful. And my how we’ve grown from ten members to nearly seventy. In 2021, we will celebrate our fortieth-year anniversary. We might just throw a party - come and join us!