

## Abby Lassen Receives WLA's 2020 Owl Award

by Angie King

I am honored to introduce the 2020 Women Lawyers Association (WLA) Outstanding Woman Lawyer award winner, Abby Lassen.

The OWL Award or Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award, given since 2012, honors a local woman lawyer with seven years or more work experience actively promoting the advancement of women. Previous recipients have worked tirelessly advocating for the advancement of women nationally, statewide within the legal profession and outside it; implementing programs supporting women in the community; supporting young women wishing to join the legal profession; and serving as mentors.

This award began as a way to raise awareness of the achievements of women attorneys who promote the advancement of women in the profession and in our community.

Lassen personifies this principle. Her career has focused on public service, representing the marginalized and underrepresented clients. In fact, she says she always intended to use her legal skills to advocate for structural changes in our society that would allow everyone to have the necessary support and opportunity to pursue their potential. She has also been employed as an educator and social service provider, which gave her a firsthand view over the years, through the eyes of her social service and legal clients, of the flaws in our institutions that need to be remedied and holes in the safety net that need repairing.

One example serves to demonstrate her commitment to our

community: it took three years and a lot of negotiating, lobbying and partnering with other agencies, but Lassen was the moving force behind the recent changes in the SLO County General Assistance welfare program that provides a meager cash aid for residents that don't fit into other benefits programs. As a result of her constant pressure, county regulations now conform to state law—improving the GA application approval process, ensuring that all GA recipients receive a housing allowance, adjusting the job search and training requirements to a reasonable level, revising the resource eligibility limit, and allowing for the continuance of GA payments pending a hearing decision.

So, who is Abby Lassen and what has influenced her career direction? When we spoke for this article, one perspective/focus kept recurring: her choices always involved how to make the world a better place.

In Jewish thought, this is called Tikkun Olam: "Any activity that improves the world, bringing it closer to the harmonious state for which it was created. Tikkun Olam implies that while the world is innately good, its Creator purposely left room for us to improve upon His work." This principle was part of Lassen's Jewish heritage and experience as a child, and it has been furthered by her experiences with the diverse cultures she has encountered, and guides her life choices today.

Lassen was always interested in cultural anthropology—the amazing diversity of cultures around the world—and selected Stanford because of its

anthropology program. After graduation, she set off to see the world. First stop was Indonesia, with a two-year program that taught English to their government employees, and where she was also an instructor at one of many teacher training colleges, similar to our community colleges. This experience helped her realize the diversity of humankind, being open to all sorts of people and not making judgments about them. This attitude of being inclusive and open to "others" has certainly helped in her work with underserved and marginalized clients.

On her return from Indonesia, Lassen lived with her older sister in San Francisco, and worked as a teacher's aide in the city's school district. She next took a position with U.S. Public Health Service as quarantine inspector for incoming refugees due to the Vietnam war, from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—a challenge, she says, because she did not speak their languages, and not many of the refugees knew any English. It was the age-old point-and-use-gestures to count household members, as they passed through her station, and another milepost on her road to a life of understanding the importance of diversity and inclusion.

Lassen decided that if she wanted a career in which she could make a difference, she needed to pursue graduate studies. It was either social work or law school. Law school won.

Lassen worked to put herself through law school, first at the SF school district, and as a work-study

*Continued on page 22*

student at SF Neighborhood Legal Assistance Foundation and Legal Assistance to the Elderly, where she was an advocate for clients with public benefits cases. While studying for the bar, she was a hearing representative for the Legal Unit of the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA).

Are you beginning to get the picture? Lassen will be at the forefront of making her part of the world better, wherever and whatever she is doing.

One thing led to another, and by 1986 Lassen was working in Santa Barbara as an attorney with Channel Counties Legal Services Association, when she met her future husband, Michael LeCover, at a game night sponsored by a Jewish singles group. LeCover was a judge for the Santa Barbara office of the State Workers' Compensation Appeals Board (WCAB). His office was across the parking lot that her office overlooked. Who knew? Within two years they were married.

In 1990, they moved to SLO County when LeCover became one of the judges at the newly opened Grover Beach WCAB office, and Lassen got a position at California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA).

In her speech accepting the OWL award at the March WLA meeting, Lassen brought up two connected parts of her life and wove them together to make her point: While lawyers serve on the boards of hundreds of nonprofit organizations in SLO County and contribute numerous volunteer hours to our community agencies, the effort to bridge the gap locally to provide legal services to persons who cannot afford the usual billing rate of private attorneys still needs more support from the legal community.

Using her own life experience

of an instance when an unsavory perception of lawyers personally impacted her, she related that when she and LeCover were looking into the possibility of adopting, the agency representative told them they had two strikes against them from the start. They were told the prospective mothers held negative opinions toward attorneys and Jews and that their profile would likely be viewed unfavorably. This misperception dismayed her, and showed even more reason for lawyers to overcome negative stereotypes and the systemic exclusion of some groups of our society. She says it re-affirmed her belief in the importance of concentrating on social justice and diversity issues. In the end, however, they did not proceed with adoption when Lassen became pregnant with her older daughter.

The first strike may be less of a problem now, 30 years later, as bar organizations have overcome the negative perceptions of attorneys by demonstrating the value of our work and our volunteer activities in the community. Some of that has come about from awards programs instituted to showcase lawyers' good works. WLASLO OWL award is one of those.

The other strike cemented her conviction of the importance of concentrating on social justice and diversity issues, as a way to improve the world (Tikkun Olam, again). In her local activities, Lassen has been involved in several volunteer activities aimed at respecting and understanding differences, be they racial, ethnic, sexual orientation or disabilities, in organizations including the Anti-Defamation League Regional Board and the Community Affairs Council of the JCC/Federation of San Luis Obispo; as volunteer legal/benefits consultant for clients of SAFE

(Services Affirming Family Empowerment); South County Youth Coalition Board; Opportunity Conference Steering Committee; member of the Low-Income Health Program Stakeholder Group/Affordable Care Act Planning Committee (studied feasibility of SLO County participating in LIHP and implementation impact of Affordable Care Act); 5 Cities Homeless Coalition Board and Five Cities Diversity Coalition-Steering Committee; and seven years co-leading the Benefits ARCH (Advocacy and Resource Connection for Homeless) coalition of community groups assisting homeless populations applying for SSI and other government benefits, just to name a few.

In all these activities, Lassen made choices about her career. While her two children were young, she chose to take what some call the "mommy-track" in order to stay home with them and nurture their early childhood development. She, and many other women, however, call this choice work-life balance. Making the world a better place means raising children who value inclusion and diversity and non-judgmental attitudes.

Lassen says she purposely decided to be part of their childhood development and, thus, chose work positions that allowed her the flexibility to be home with them. This is one of her bits of wisdom to pass on to the next generation of attorneys (both men and women): you can choose to balance your work and your life, and your priorities. It was a conscious choice to make her own life work for her, to fit her priorities. During this time, she volunteered at many of those organizations listed earlier, and others more connected with her children's growth (e.g., Nipomo Branch Library Volunteer;

Measure A School Bond (funds for construction of Nipomo High School) Steering Committee Member and Voter Registration Coordinator (LMUSD); LMUSD School Boundaries Committee, Bright Futures Sustainability Committee member, Nipomo Elementary School Site Council member; PTA membership chair for Nipomo and Dana Elementary Schools; classroom volunteer in LMUSD schools; Girl Scout Co-Leader around 2001 and Summer Camp Counselor.

After working in education and social service positions that fit her daughters' school schedules, as well as volunteering at CRLA, Lassen went back to work as a staff attorney at CRLA only when her younger daughter was in middle school; she's now a graduate student at UT Austin in social work. Her older daughter holds a PhD in chemical and bio-molecular engineering and is employed by a think tank that advises the U.S. Navy.

Lassen herself has just started a newly created position as Health Equity Coordinator with the County of SLO Public Health Department, which she says gives her the opportunity to collaborate with a hard-working team in on the ground floor responding to the pandemic vaccination efforts and the county's changing needs. It gives her another opportunity to make a difference—to help ensure our County's response to the pandemic is equitable.

Health equity is achieved when everyone has the opportunity to attain her full health potential and no one is disadvantaged in doing so due to her social/economic position or other social circumstance. One of Lassen's main tasks is to coordinate the countywide effort to reduce the disparate burden of Covid-19 among populations known to be at disproportionate risk.

This segues perfectly into the series of questions that I was asked to include. "What motivates you?" should be obvious by now. It is, Lassen says, the quest to improve and provide basic needs for everyone—housing, decent wages, health care, child care, opportunities to advance, e.g., Tikkun Olam.

When I asked, who inspires you and why, she said "RBG and Madeleine Albright, for obvious reasons. And my clients," she adds quickly, "whose pursuit of their rights and their willingness to persevere despite difficult circumstances inspires me."

King: What do you find enjoyable about your job?

Lassen: In general, working well with a team of like-minded people addressing a problem together. The sense of community is important to her. This is apparent from the partial list of positions she has held, where "collaborative," "coalition," "stakeholder group" are words that help define the task of the participants.

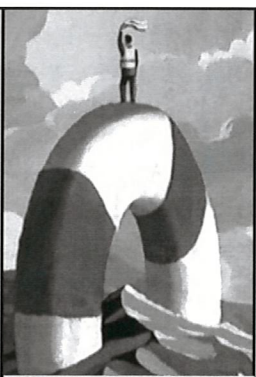
King: What challenges do you

encounter?

Lassen: There are never enough resources or staff to do an adequate job for the clients. It is also a challenge to overcome the chasm that seems to exist between providers at the ground level, social workers at Department of Social Services, for example, or school counselors, or the many nonprofits that serve her client population, and the legal resources they need.

As she said in her remarks to WLA, "The effects of the pandemic and the efforts of the racial justice movement have trained a spotlight on the structural inequities that persons of various ethnic, racial and other marginalized groups still face today in the United States. In our county with a population of less than 300,000 persons, I understand that we cannot solve all the nationwide issues, but I do believe that our small size is an advantage for bringing together our community to agree on strategies to provide more affordable housing and supportive services to persons who are homeless and to support the work of agencies such as the First Five Commission and the Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo, which encourage best practices for early childhood education and strive to improve child care options."

And that is why she is the Outstanding Woman Lawyer of 2020. Congratulations, Abby Lassen. ■

<p><b>THE OTHER BAR</b></p>		<p>Free confidential assistance to lawyers, judges, paralegals and law students with substance abuse problems.</p> <p>Weekly Other Bar 12-Step Meetings are held in many areas, and others are being established. For times and locations, or to start a meeting in your area, contact the number or website below.</p> <p>Provider of Certified MCLE Instructors</p> <p>Confidential Hotline 24 Hours a Day: (800) 222-0767 <a href="http://www.otherbar.org">www.otherbar.org</a></p>
-------------------------------------	---	---