

THE

Volume 67, Issue 1

FEDERAL LAWYER

The Magazine of the Federal Bar Association

100
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION
1920 2020

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President

By Leia Leitner

The Year of the Woman... President

LEIA LEITNER

This past year, one of the Federal Bar Association's (FBA) local chapters—FBA Orlando—celebrated an amazing achievement: For the first time in its history, the chapter had not just back-to-back women presidents, but back-to-back-to-back women presidents! Last year's FBA Orlando president, Lauren Millcarek, took the baton from Tea Sisic, who took over from Kelly Garcia. Considering the chapter had only three other women presidents, having three in a row marked a seminal moment. That moment nicely coincided with FBA National President Maria Vathis's term this year as the FBA's 10th woman president in its century-long history.

Why is this moment an "achievement," an important milestone to reach? Hopefully, it marks a sea change. When it comes to gender and bar leadership, we are closer than ever before to bridging the gap between gender disparities—but because women's bar presidencies can still be measured by the handful, it still feels important for us to celebrate the occasion.

As Pamela Roberts, chair of the American Bar Association (ABA) Commission on Women in the Profession, stated, "I've found that in many respects, bar associations and the organized bar might be a bit more open to women in leadership. That doesn't mean [women] are there yet." She went on to state, "While some pipelines are established and making good headway, there are also pockets that

are not." The challenge is not only to maintain and build on that momentum in associations that do have established pipelines, but also to spread the gender-equality gospel to other bars, law firms, and organizations where such equality between men and women does not fully exist.

While obstacles remain, the FBA is one of those voluntary bar organizations that has provided better networking opportunities to establish and dedicate opportunities for women lawyers, allowing them to thrive in leadership. The intent and hope is that by celebrating today's successes, we provide the foundation for tomorrow's more diverse bar and legal community leadership.

As Vathis poignantly pointed out in a discussion regarding gender disparities in the legal profession during International Women's Day (March 8):

As lawyers, men and women alike, we have a unique and essential role to play in empowering the women and girls of the world—which is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do. Empowering women and girls has a well-documented "multiplier effect" on society, with the potential to transform the global economy. A recent study by the McKinsey Global Institute found that, in a scenario where women and men play identical roles in labor markets, as much as \$28 trillion would be added to global annual GDP by 2025.

As a female bar association leader, I am proud that the FBA has long recognized that strength lies in diversity and that the law is a potent force for change. As the FBA marks Interna-

tional Women's Day, we rededicate ourselves to the values of diversity, equality, and justice for all.

In light of this important moment in our bar's history, we asked these women presidents to reflect on their terms in leadership, their challenges and victories, and how they are paving the way for the next generation. Their answers are below.

Maria Vathis

FBA President, 2018-2019

The FBA's 2018-2019 president, Maria Vathis, is of counsel to Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, where she practices complex business litigation and consumer financial services litigation. She has proudly served the FBA since the start of her legal career in 2002. This includes serving as a board member from 2012-2015; serving two terms as one of the vice presidents of the Seventh Circuit; chairing the National Essay Contest for the last two years; chairing the Audit Committee and Convention Committee; and being an active member of the Second Annual Women in the Law Planning Committee, the Nominations and Elections Committee, the 100-Year Anniversary Planning Committee, the Bench/Bar Committee, and the Task Force on Conventions. She is also chairing the Social Events Committee for the 100-Year Anniversary Celebration.

Q: Why is it important to you to involve women in leadership roles in the FBA?

A: The FBA is forward-thinking when it comes to diversity and inclusion, so I think that the composition of our leadership should reflect that. Being inclusive brings strength and balance to our organization. I am incredibly proud and grateful to the FBA members for the amazing opportunity to lead such an esteemed and accomplished group of professionals. I am only the 10th female FBA president in the 100 years that the organization has existed. I am grateful to my mentors, friends, and supporters over the years who made this possible. There is a place for everyone in the FBA, and women make great leaders!

As a female attorney and national bar association leader, I believe that it is important to mentor young women in the legal community and beyond. During my term as FBA president, I have had young women from different parts of the world see social media posts from the FBA and contact me to tell me that they view me as a role model and inspiration because I hold a national leadership position at a relatively young age. I will never forget those messages, and it has forever changed my perspective. I learned that there are different ways to be a mentor—from up close or from afar.

Q: What legacy do you hope you left as the 10th woman president of the FBA?

A: One of my initiatives this year was to focus on health, wellness, and civility. Statistics show that lawyers experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. Lawyers often suffer from stress-related illnesses, and lawyers frequently deal with incivility. Focusing on health and wellness can help alleviate these issues. During my term as national president, we offered fitness classes at our conferences,

including yoga, 5K runs, and Jazzercise. We also provided healthy food options at our conferences. In addition, the Senior Lawyers Division launched a webinar series on attorney wellness.

I am pleased to see that the organization will continue to have a permanent focus on health, wellness, and the importance of civility. In addition, we are focused on celebrating the achievements of women in the law and the importance of diversity and inclusion. We also continue to focus on civics education and have made great strides in educating students about the third branch of government. To combine those efforts, next year's national essay contest topic will focus on voting in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave many women the right to vote. More details to come!

Q: How did you get involved with the FBA? What advice would you give to other women lawyers who hope to become leaders in the FBA?

A: I joined the board of the Chicago Chapter of the FBA when I was a brand-new attorney. My colleague was an officer, and she strongly encouraged me to join and become involved because the board was looking for younger members. As the years passed, I eventually became an officer of the Chicago Chapter and then became chapter president. Once I finished my presidency with the local chapter, I got involved at the national level by joining the national board of directors and as a Seventh Circuit vice president. I also participated in our annual Capitol Hill Day, during which we meet with lawmakers to lobby for various issues, and I also chaired numerous committees at the national level. After several years of being active at the national level, I was successful in becoming an officer. While I have enjoyed all of my time in the FBA, my year as national president has been special. I truly enjoyed visiting different FBA chapters all around the nation, speaking at conferences and events, and meeting our members.

My advice to female attorneys who would like to become FBA leaders is the same as my advice to female attorneys in general, which is to work hard and to remember to ask for what you want, whether it's a position in an organization, a promotion, or business from clients.

Q: What's the best leadership lesson you've learned in your career?

A: Plan in advance, but make sure that you remain flexible, because inevitably, there will be a few curveballs!

Lauren Millcarek

FBA Orlando President, 2018-2019

Lauren Millcarek is a federal litigator at Shutts & Bowen LLP, where she focuses her practice on complex business litigation and cyber-assisted fraud. Millcarek is an active member of the Orlando legal community, serving as chair of the Grievance Committee of the Middle District of Florida, Orlando Division; as treasurer of the Central Florida Association for Women Lawyers; and now as the national delegate of the Orlando Chapter to the national FBA. She served as FBA Orlando's youngest chapter president ever and its sixth woman president from 2018-2019. Prior to entering private practice, Millcarek served as a federal judicial law clerk to Hon. Roy B. "Skip" Dalton Jr.,

alongside her predecessor and good friend Tea Sisic. Millcarek first became involved with FBA Orlando during her clerkship.

Q: What was your biggest challenge during your term?

A: One of the biggest challenges during my term was that I left the law firm where I had worked for nearly five years to move to a new firm. Changing jobs mid-presidency was not an easy decision to make, nor was it easy to carry out. However, I had a great example in my predecessor, friend, and former colleague Tea Sisic. She had also made the decision to change jobs and move during her term—a big upheaval to her life that was really brave, and something she did to make herself and her family happier. I learned from her example of empowering her board members to lead by encouraging those around you to lead. If I had tried to do everything myself and micromanage my board, I never would have survived that difficult job transition. I knew that, with Tea's example before me as inspiration, I could make that scary, important leap with the strong support of my board members and my trust in their abilities. So, the challenge turned out to be a great lesson—and my life is much better for it.

Q: What was your favorite moment during your term?

A: My favorite moment during my term was the first moment! I was sworn in as president by my mentor and former boss, Judge Dalton. He swore me into the Florida Bar at the beginning of my career, so having him swear me into my presidency was such a lovely, full-circle moment. Tea flew in from California to pass the gavel to me. I happened to have several close friends who were serving as presidents of other local voluntary bar organizations—they all turned up to support me. There have been many amazing moments during my term, but looking out into the crowd to see a packed house of friends, colleagues, and judges, while repeating the words of the oath of office spoken by my beloved mentor, Judge Dalton, is a moment I will remember for the rest of my life.

Q: What legacy do you hope to leave FBA Orlando?

A: The theme of my year was “FBA is your access.” Having practiced in federal court for my entire career, I know that the federal bar is an incredibly small, tight-knit community. This can be wonderful in many ways, but it can also be insular, leaving some practitioners feeling isolated and intimidated coming into federal court; I wanted to change that perception. To flesh out this theme into action, I set three major goals for my term: (1) to increase the diversity of our board and our membership in order to make everyone feel comfortable and included in the federal bar community; (2) to increase our focus on new and young federal lawyers to prepare them better to enter federal court; and (3) to further cement our partnerships with other local voluntary bar organizations and to make FBA Orlando more visible in the community, in order to make federal court feel more accessible and make our FBA members a more integral part of our larger bar.

I am thrilled to report that we achieved all of these goals during my term. We slated and elected the most diverse board of directors we have ever had, with people of different races, genders, ethnicities, orientations, ages, and practice areas. I appointed a Diversity Committee for the first time in our chapter's history, headed by Lakisha Davis, and our committee participated in events targeted toward increasing diversity and inclusion in our local bar.

I also appointed a Young Lawyers Committee for the first time, to back our long-running position of Young Lawyers director on the

board; this year's Young Lawyers' director was Dustin Mauser-Claasen, and he and his team did a phenomenal job. We held numerous programs this year targeted to young lawyers: We partnered with our local Young Lawyers Section of the Orange County Bar Association to hold our second annual Federal Practice for the Occasional Federal Practitioner seminar (a program that I created and chaired in its inaugural year in 2018), which garnered over 100 attendees. We started student chapters at both of our local law schools and held events there benefiting students. We also became an affiliate of the Florida Bar's Young Lawyers Division (YLD) for the first time and received grant money from the bar to hold a health and wellness event in conjunction with the YLD's statewide initiative.

We also continued our strong partnership with other local voluntary bar organizations, joining with them on multiple programs, and hired a community outreach coordinator to assist in putting on more programming targeted to the public and to liaise with the court and the larger bar. Finally, we increased our visibility within the bar by launching a weekly newsletter and a daily social media presence; my communications director, Leia Leitner, has done an incredible job of getting the word out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter about our programming, and we have been reposted often by FBA National and the Florida Bar. I am so proud of my team for showing that FBA Orlando truly is our members' access point for training, education, and networking, and I know President-Elect Colin Baker will continue this legacy.

Q: You are the youngest FBA Orlando president ever and only the sixth woman president in the chapter's nearly half-century history. What advice would you give to other young women lawyers who want to follow in your footsteps?

A: Women have made so much progress in the profession, but we also have so much further to go. When I was in law school, I heard the stories of women lawyers and professors who spoke of being mistaken for the secretary or the court reporter, who had opposing counsel call them “sweetie” in court or depositions, and who were spoken over by male colleagues in meetings and on conference calls. Unfortunately, I too have experienced all of those things—millennials are not immune from the gender-based discrimination that plagued earlier generations. However, we are so much more aware of these things now. There are CLEs about #MeToo and impostor syndrome and how to negotiate your salary. My advice would be not to let it take you by surprise: There is still sexism in this profession. You will experience it. But we have so many more options as to how to handle it now. Use your voice.

Here's what I tell the young women associates I mentor:

1. Always ask for \$20,000 more than you think you'll get. Seriously. Just ask.
2. Find women mentors—but also find men who will mentor you and lift you up.
3. Find the partners who will acknowledge to the client that you were the one who did the work. Find the ones who will tell the judge that you wrote the motion and will let you argue it. They exist!
4. Find a work environment that is sustainable for the kind of life you want to have, whatever life that is—they also exist!
5. Get a therapist, get a gym membership, and get a meditation app. Actually use all three. Don't wait until you are exhausted and burnt out to take care of yourself!

Tea Sisic

FBA Orlando President, 2017-2018

Tea Sisic serves as in-house counsel at Hired, Inc., in California. Previously, she was in private practice in Florida, practicing labor and employment litigation and business litigation. Prior to her work in private practice, she served as a federal judicial law clerk to Hon. Anne C. Conway and Hon. Roy B. Dalton Jr. Sisic has been involved with the FBA since law school. She first started serving on the board of FBA Orlando following her clerkships, and served as president of the Orlando Chapter from 2017–2018.

Q: What advice can you give women on balancing career and family life?

A: I am reticent to give any woman advice on balancing her family and career life because what may work for one of us may not work for the other. The important thing is that we are allowed the flexibility to choose for ourselves what that balance may look like. On some days, it may mean missing your daughter's school performance to attend a long-anticipated product launch at your company, and on others, it may mean you are missing an important policy-setting meeting with one of the executives because you chose to attend your son's Mother's Day breakfast. What matters is that a woman is not punished for either choice and that it is hers and only hers to make. I am lucky to be at the stage of my career where I have finally struck the right balance for my family, my employer, and me. That is all I can wish for all of us working mothers out there.

Q: What have you sacrificed (both personally and professionally) at each stage of your career?

A: Each stage of my career presented challenges one would normally expect with new beginnings—they are tough, but also exciting and hopeful. I try—though many a time early in my career I failed—to keep things in perspective and to remember that I do not need to have everything and all at the same time. I am finding it much easier now to do that and to enjoy my life and my career, stage by stage, day by day.

Q: What were your biggest struggles balancing family and a bar leadership role with the FBA?

A: I was seven months pregnant with my second child when I took office in 2017. I have to give a major shoutout to my predecessor, Kelly Garcia, who nominated me to be her president-elect knowing I was about to have my hands full (times two). When she and I talked about plans for her presidency and her board, she never once asked me whether I could handle it or if it would be the right decision for my family. She simply said that, given my experience and past service on the board, I was the best person for the job. That meant the world to me.

Nevertheless, feelings of self-doubt were a constant noise and difficult to ignore, and the question, "Should I accept this?" crossed my mind more times than I would like to admit. But I kept thinking about the sacrifices my parents made when they immigrated to the United States 17 years earlier from war-ravaged Bosnia and about my then 2-year-old daughter who will undoubtedly have her own doubts about her abilities one day. I wanted to make my parents proud, and I wanted to be able to tell my daughter with conviction that she can do

whatever her little heart desires. So, the biggest struggle for me was actually getting to the "yes" to serving as president of the Orlando Chapter. Once that was out of the way, I was able to focus on achieving my goals, choosing the best board our local chapter has ever had, and planning for my absence with the help of my president-elect and my dear friend, Lauren Millcarek.

Q: What were some of your goals as your time as president of FBA Orlando?

A: I had four overarching goals that I wanted to empower my board to accomplish: community outreach, strengthening and expanding partnerships with other local bar associations, balancing our budget for the first time in our then 46-year chapter history, and enlarging our board. I could not be more proud to share that we accomplished all of our goals with amazing results: We raised funds for our local shelter for the homeless and underprivileged, as well as for relief efforts in Puerto Rico following Hurricanes Irma and Maria; we partnered with six other local bar associations to bring our members amazing speakers, such as Congressman Darren Soto, Hon. Shira Scheindlin of New York, then-president of the American Bar Association Hilarie Bass, and FBA national president Maria Vathis. We accomplished an 11 percent year-over-year growth after we balanced our budget, and by enlarging the board to add at-large board members, we allowed more members to become actively involved, chair FBA events, and build their resumes for future executive board positions.

None of this would have happened without the unwavering commitment of my board and our executive director, Jessica Strong. While I was on maternity leave, Lauren and Jess took the oar with enthusiasm and full support of my agenda. It meant so much to me that I had strategic partners in them and each of the members of the executive team. So many stepped up and chaired their own events, and so many jumped in wherever and whenever needed. I truly believe that leadership is not about the leader at all, and my board was a true testament to that.

We also have an invaluable partner, supporter, cheerleader, and mentor in our federal bench and court staff. All of our events held at the federal courthouse are met with huge success, and that is only because of them. From meeting with federal bar leaders across the country, I know this is rare and truly special, so I want to thank them for all that they do.

Q: Do you have mentors? If so, what's one core message you received from your mentors?

A: Of course I do! I owe everything I have accomplished in my career—and partly in my personal life, as well—to my mentors. There are some people who simply enter your lives and change it for the better for good. For me, these are Hon. Anne C. Conway and Hon. Roy B. Dalton Jr. I am beyond grateful for the love, support, mentorship, friendship, and family I have gained from and in them. If I had to choose core messages they've shared with me, they would be that: (1) I am smart enough and good enough; and (2) I do not need to know everything, but I am capable of and should always be open to learning new things. To a young, wide-eyed Bosnian-American woman finding her place in this world, these words and the conviction with which they were said have been instrumental in the pursuit of my dreams.

Kelly J.H. Garcia

FBA Orlando President, 2016-2017

Kelly Garcia is a shareholder at Gray Robinson, where she focuses her practice on litigating complex business disputes, ERISA benefits matters, and appeals in state and federal courts. Garcia served as an active member of the Orlando Chapter's board from 2013-2018, and as chapter president from 2016-2017. While serving as the president-elect, Garcia participated in the FBA's Capitol Hill Day and met with several of Florida's congressional staff as well as Sen. Bill Nelson. During her presidency, Garcia and the Orlando Chapter collaborated with Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida to initiate the *pro se* clinic services held at the Orlando Division Courthouse. Garcia also served as the Civics Outreach liaison between the Orlando Chapter and FBA National from 2017-2018.

Q: What are some traits you think great leaders possess?

A: Listening to the membership and working cohesively as a team are fundamental traits of a great leader. I believe that leading through consensus builds a stronger group.

Q: What woman inspires you and why?

A: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Because of her courage in pioneering gender equality, her incredible work ethic, and her dedication

not only to the rule of law, but also to how the rule of law impacts real people. I could go on for pages; she is such an incredible and amazing person.

Q: What are some strategies that can help women achieve more prominent roles in voluntary bar leadership?

A: The recruitment, encouragement, and mentoring of other women into these roles is essential. You cannot simply say it; you must do it.

Q: What do you think is the most significant barrier to women in bar leadership?

A: Breaking through the continued societal belief that men are the natural choice for leading an organization. Men in management roles have long held and fostered the networking connections and relationships that women generally are just learning to develop. Finding a way to change the societal mindset so that strong women are not viewed as aberrations is the hurdle we must overcome.

Q: What advice would you give to the next generation of female leaders?

A: Support, encourage, and mentor other women. Women in leadership must reject the notion that helping another woman somehow makes either of them look weak. Women supporting women is not gender-bias or favoritism, but rather a proactive movement toward leveling the playing field. ☺

