

BEGINNINGS OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN ATTORNEYS

Our Association had its headwaters in two distinct streams that quickly, if not quietly, coalesced into one organization soon styled the ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN ATTORNEYS.

On February 9-11, 1979, Memphis hosted the annual mid-year meeting of the National Association of Women Lawyers, a section of the American Bar Association. The meeting, held at the Holiday Inn Rivermont, would have taken place in Atlanta where the ABA was scheduled; however, the State of Georgia had failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment and the Women's Section opted to meet elsewhere on less hostile ground.

Alayne Adams was the Chairman of the Memphis meeting with Karen Williams serving as Registrar. Annie Morton Stout, who had been instrumental in bringing the meeting to Memphis served as Honorary Chairman. Among the various panelists discussing "The Search for Equal Protection of the Traditional Wife Under the Law," the theme of the meeting, were three other Memphis lawyers, Barbara Wade, Frances Loring and Sara Kaltenborn, by then a member of the Department of Justice Task Force on Sex Discrimination. All sessions were open to the public and all local attorneys and their respective organizations received invitations.

Interminable meetings, telephone calls and much hard work between and among Alayne Adams, Donna Fisher, Kathleen Norfleet and Karen Williams, all local lawyers, eventuated in a successful mid-year convention attended by women lawyers from near and far. When it was over, the consensus of the four was that, not only had they enjoyed working together in preparing for the convention, but it had been very rewarding having the opportunity to interact with other women attorneys. It was felt that this experience of support and camaraderie should be sustained and expanded, if possible, and that work should begin toward organizing a group of women attorneys.

To this end a mailing list of some 130 local women was compiled, many of them attorneys practicing privately, in various governmental agencies and as in-house counsel. Others were women enrolled in law school or in one way or another proximately related to law offices, judicial offices or educational institutions. With the help of Emory Edwards and Jocelyn Wurzburg the process began of contacting those on the list in an effort to set up a meeting to discuss establishing such an organization.

At approximately the same time, on February 27, 1979, at a meeting of the Women's NETWORK at the Petroleum Club, eight or ten women lawyers among the general membership present expressed their interest in perhaps forming an association of women lawyers and agreed to explore the possibility more fully in a meeting to be called in the near future.

And so the two streams met on March 21, 1979, at the home

of Jocelyn Wurzburg. DeeAnn Downing with the Memphis and Shelby County Bar Association talked to the group about forming a section of the MBA for women lawyers. A discussion followed concerning whether or not a group should actually be formed, and if so, whether it should be a part of the MBA or an independent group.

A second meeting was held on April 10, 1979, at the home of Emory Edwards. There the discussion continued, at times becoming very lively, as to whether the group should actually form or not. Some women were of the opinion that by banding together, the group would set itself apart as female attorneys rather than attorneys, when women lawyers, at that time, were trying very hard to be accepted and respected as members of the profession. Others felt that it was not a question of "either or," but of "both and," and that an association should be formed because it would be beneficial to have a group of women lawyers to turn to for support and for shared knowledge and help in unfamiliar areas of law and procedure, and to provide greater service especially to women in the community.

The latter feeling prevailed, and attention then turned to the form the group should take, whether it should be independent, a section of the MBA, a chapter of the National Association of Women Lawyers of the ABA, or a revitalization of a group which had been locally formed years previously and was now dormant, called the Women's Law Forum.

After another energetic discussion, it was decided that the group would be independent.

The official organizational meeting presided over by Alayne Adams, the temporary chairperson, took place May 10, 1979, at the home of Bonnie Ragland.

Following the agreed upon agenda the first order of business was the election of the first officers of AWA: President, Gail Mathes; Vice-president, Bonnie Ragland; Secretary, Kathleen D. Norfleet, and Treasurer, Karen Williams. Frances Loring was designated as a member-at-large of the Executive Committee.

More discussion followed regarding a name for the organization. From among several suggestions, "Association for Women Attorneys" was selected by the members.

Next on the agenda, discussions were had regarding the purpose and structure of the organization. A threefold purpose was decided upon:

1. To support one another in our endeavors as professionals and attorneys;
2. To educate ourselves and others in terms of the law; and
3. To be of service and to address ourselves

to the legal needs of the community.

Another full discussion eventuated in the decision to remain a loosely-formed association until October 1, 1979, at which time a decision would be made whether to become a more formal organization or to disband.

In attendance at this formal meeting of the Association of Women Attorneys were: Alayne Adams, Doris Berry, Linda Clements, Marian Cover, Emory Edwards, Frances Loring, Gail Mathes, Katherine Martin, Kathleen Norfleet, Claire Orman, Bonnie Ragland, Catherine Rudner, Maria Russotto, Nancy Ryan, Dianne Shockley, Sandra L. Smegelsky, Rita L. Stotts, Mary Walker and Pauline Weaver.

Meetings were held in June 1979, at the home of Katherine Martin; in July 1979, at the home of Priscilla Apperson; in August 1979, at the home of Dianne Shockley; in September 1979, at the Petroleum Club, where Dean Nicholas L. White of the Memphis State University, School of Law, spoke to the group; and in October 1979, at the home of Nili Sauer.

The Executive Committee, composed of the four elected officers and one at-large member, met regularly, usually at the Mississippi River Company in Overton Square, prior to each monthly membership meeting. At the October 11th meeting it was unanimously decided to recommend that the group continue as an unincorporated association.

At the general meeting on October 15, 1979, the membership agreed and the recommendation of the executive committee was adopted.

It was also decided that law students should be associate members of the association: they would be a resource to women lawyers in the community providing new insights into changes in legal trends, and the women lawyers would, in turn, be of help and a resource to the students.

The final agenda item concerned the recommendation of the Executive Committee that dues be assessed at \$1.00 per month.

Priscilla Apperson moved that the Association of Women Attorneys continue as an unincorporated association having dues of \$12.00 per year and that three standing committees be established: a speakers bureau, an education committee and a media committee. Dianne Shockley seconded the motion, which passed.

A motion was made to keep the same slate of officers that had been elected in May; it passed by acclamation.

In making her motion that the Association of Women Attorneys continue, Priscilla Apperson stated that she believed that the association provided a chance to know other women attorneys and was beneficial professionally, that it was helpful to "network" and that there would be many other ways in which women attorneys would

benefit from this association.

This prediction has proved itself true through twenty years since the formal organizational meeting on May 10, 1979, as the Association has grown in strength and numbers and service to each other in the membership and to the public, and is acknowledged as a credit to the profession.

Kathleen Day Norfleet

Frances Grant Loring

October 14, 1999