

Alliance for Women Kickoff Event

By Michele M. Jochner
Editorial Board Member

Celebrating more than two decades of service to the women of our legal community, the Alliance for Women recently held its annual kickoff event, filling the CBA's Corboy Hall to near-capacity. Joining together female attorneys from various practice areas and different career stages, the event provided a rich opportunity for networking while learning about the fabulous programming for which the Alliance is known.

This year's Alliance co-chairs, Esther Chang and Rachel Moore, welcomed all in attendance, promising a year full of exciting and informative events revolving around the 2013-2014 theme: "Advocating for Women in Our Profession, Our Community and Worldwide." Chang introduced the current lineup of Committee chairs, who will lead their respective groups in spearheading programs to support, educate and promote female lawyers. Moore then introduced the event's guest speaker, Illinois Lt. Governor Sheila Simon, whose career exemplifies the group's "advocacy for women" theme.



At the bar year kickoff meeting for the Alliance for Women are (left-right) AFW Co-Chair Rachel Jana Moore; Illinois Lt. Governor Sheila Simon; CBA President J. Timothy Eaton; and AFW Co-Chair Esther Chang. Photo by Bill Richert.

In introducing Lt. Governor Simon, Moore observed that public service runs in Simon's blood, as she is the daughter of the late Paul and Jeanne Simon, who served together in the Illinois House and were highly regarded for honesty and integrity in public service.

Simon, who is a lawyer, teacher and mother of two college-age daughters, attended law school at Georgetown University. Upon graduation, rather than starting her career at a large firm, Simon opted instead to serve clients with limited means through her work at Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance. There, by helping victims of domestic violence, she began her career-long advocacy against this crime. Thereafter, Simon prosecuted domestic violence cases as an Assistant State's Attorney with the Jackson County prosecutor's office. She then spent a decade as a Southern Illinois University (SIU) law professor, where she helped launch the SIU School of Law's domestic violence clinic, which serves clients at no cost and trains law students in handling domestic violence matters. Moore noted that, as Lieutenant Governor, Simon has continued her prior work in developing tools and resources for survivors and families affected by domestic violence.

In addressing the assembled crowd, Simon encouraged all to do as much as possible to advocate on behalf of women.

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She recounted her early days as a lawyer handling domestic violence cases, and her growing realization over the years that although much has been done to combat this scourge, much yet still needs to be done to assist victims and their families, especially downstate where resources are much more limited.

Indeed, the statistics are sobering. Nationally, one in four women has experienced domestic violence in her lifetime, and in Illinois, nearly 40 percent of women will become victims of this crime. Many of these women, however, have an extremely difficult time finding lawyers who can help them navigate through the legal maze. In 47 Illinois counties, there are no attorneys practicing family law, while an additional 33 counties have five or fewer family law attorneys.

To help fill the gap in rural areas lacking attorneys with knowledge of family law who can assist domestic violence survivors, Simon invited the attendees to participate in the online "Virtual Legal Clinic" program she recently established. This program provides survivors of domestic violence at local shelters in underserved areas with a single, free consultation with attorneys across Illinois who practice in family law. Using webcams and high-speed Internet connections, victims can learn from the lawyers about legal options and remedies that are available to keep themselves and their families safe.

Simon noted that the first such program opened in December 2011, hosted by a domestic violence shelter in Peoria. Since then, two additional sites have opened in downstate Jacksonville and Cairo. The goal of the program is to make the legal system seem less overwhelming and easier to understand as a result of the consultation, which helps survivors make informed decisions as to the appropriate next steps.

Simon's steadfast commitment to advocating for women inspired many to consider following in her footsteps and volunteer to make a positive difference. The kickoff event having been voted a resounding success, the attendees departed knowing that this was only the first of many wonderful programs to be presented by the Alliance for Women in the coming year. ■

The CBA's Alliance for Women works within the CBA to advance interests of women in the legal profession and the larger community. Through speaker forums, debates, meetings, networking events and direct community service, the Alliance brings together the talents of its diverse membership to implement strategies that effect change. Active subcommittees tackle issues including career advancement, balancing work with outside interests, cultural diversity, ending violence against women, community service, and equality in education. The Alliance meets on the 4th Tuesday of each month. For more information, go to www.chicagobar.org/committees.

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