

# THE ADVANCEMENT OF FEMALE LAWYERS IN TODAY'S LEGAL FIELD:

There can be little doubt that female lawyers have made significant inroads in the Nevada legal profession since Laura May Tilden became the first woman admitted to practice law in Nevada in 1893. As of October 2010, 30 percent of all active members of the State Bar of Nevada are women, with many holding visible and influential roles in the judicial, public and private sectors. Standing in counterpoint to this is an oft-cited statistic regarding the advancement of women in the legal field in general: since 2000, the number of female law school graduates has consistently hovered around 50 percent, but only 15 percent of the partners in the nation's 100 largest law firms are female (The National Association of Women Lawyers and the The NAWL Foundation, *Report of the Fifth Annual National Survey on Retention and Promotion of Women in Law Firms*, October 2010). Within this environment, *Nevada Lawyer* had the privilege of meeting with four successful female lawyers, to discuss the reasons behind the choices they have made.

# A SNAPSHOT OF FOUR LEGAL CAREERS

BY ERIN BARNETT, ESQ.

## Avece Higbee

Marquis Aurbach Coffing

Avece Higbee is a shareholder at Marquis Aurbach Coffing and has been with the firm for more than 20 years. Higbee was Marquis Aurbach Coffing's first female shareholder and has, for several years, balanced her professional responsibilities with the demands of having a family. Of course, Higbee's success has been a result of years of hard work and professionalism. However, there are several extraneous factors that Higbee credits as contributing to the progress of her career, such as the objective compensation structure employed at her firm.

"It is important to work at a firm where the compensation structure is based on objective, measurable factors, such as hours worked and revenue collected," Higbee says. This structure has allowed Higbee to set her financial targets in advance and to act accordingly. As a result, Higbee defines her own goals and is her own judge as to whether or not they have been met.

Another factor contributing to Higbee's continued success has been her decision to focus on certain areas of practice, including commercial litigation, common interest community matters, commercial and residential landlord and tenant matters, and SBA loan matters.

"I practice in areas of the law that can be considered niches, which has allowed me to develop expertise." The result is increased efficiency and more billable time, very important qualities for any lawyer practicing in a law firm that operates on the billable hour.

Finally, a key factor in Higbee's ability to balance several priorities at once has been her own willingness to adopt a flexible daily schedule. "Whereas some lawyers may structure their work day as a block of time with relatively defined start and end times, my work day often commences before I am at the office, while my kids get ready for school and I am often at the office after business hours getting my work done."





## Jeannie Hua

Law Office of Jeannie N. Hua, Incorporated

Jeannie Hua is the owner of the Law Office of Jeannie N. Hua, a criminal defense firm in Las Vegas. A criminal defense attorney with 16 years experience under her belt, Hua feels that ownership of her own practice affords her the greatest balance between competing professional and familial obligations.

Having long been interested in practicing criminal defense, Hua began her career at the Clark County Public Defender's Office, where she quickly obtained a heavy caseload. After having children, Hua attempted to temporarily maintain part-time hours. However, the pace of a criminal law case, along with Hua's caseload at the time, simply did not make part-time work a viable option.

Hua followed up her time at the Public Defender's Office with a job at a small, private criminal defense firm. Despite winning accolades from her employer and victories for her clients in the courtroom, Hua's position was terminated when she told her employer she would be having another child; her employer was concerned she simply would not be able to juggle her existing clients with a new baby. The news was hard to take – but only at first.

"It was a blessing in disguise," Hua explains. "It was a catalyst to me opening up my own practice and ultimately got me to where I am today." While the client demands remain, there are other compensations. "I love the flexibility," Hua says. Being her own boss suits not only her lifestyle but her professional style as well.

Now an established solo practitioner, Hua says she is encouraged to see that it is not uncommon during her criminal trials for the judge, prosecuting attorney and bailiff to all be women. Hua observes that the government sector has become a bit of an

"oasis" for female professionals in the legal field. However, Hua is eager to see an increased level of women in power positions in the private practice sector of law as well. "It's still not enough," says Hua. But with the increasing visibility of successful female professionals in both the legal, corporate and political world, Hua believes continued positive change is inevitable.



## Kim Boyer

Boyer Law Group

Kim Boyer is a solo practitioner who owns a successful guardianship and asset protection law practice in Las Vegas. Having begun her career as an associate at a local law firm, Boyer notes that running one's own

legal practice comes with pros and cons. "Owning your own law firm makes you responsible for several time-consuming tasks that you may not even think of as an associate," says Boyer. "Such as keeping supplies in the supply room and making

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sure human resources issues are being addressed.” Although the billable hour requirement may be gone, the practical demands of business ownership, as well as the client demands, keep Boyer as busy as any other lawyer in town. The big plus, according to Boyer, is maintaining control of the business and answering only to oneself. Further, Boyer notes that, whereas there is a statistical disparity in the number of female partners at large national firms, owning one’s own business provides female solo practitioners with a way to earn comparable compensation while avoiding the forces which are apparently limiting the number of female partners.

In addition, certain advantages can be gained by choosing the right area of practice. Estate and asset protection planning law lends itself to flat-fee billing. Thus, the more knowledgeable and efficient Boyer (and her team of paralegals and assistants) has become, in these areas, the more client work Boyer has been able to take on. As such, the revenue generated by Boyer’s law practice is not solely dependent upon the actual time Boyer spends on a file or her billable rate, but on her ability to efficiently bring her clients’ matters to a successful resolution.

## Judge Joanna Kishner

Department 31  
District Court Judge

Judge Joanna Kishner is a recently elected District Court Judge whose past experience includes practicing with and overseeing the local office of one of the nation’s largest law firms, an acting of-counsel position at an international law firm, and an in-house position at an international conglomerate. When asked to comment on her experiences as a female attorney in Nevada, Kishner is quick to note that her career path was made much easier by the female lawyers and judges who have preceded her. While it is true that relics of the historically male-dominated legal field were present when Kishner entered private practice,



many of the systematic barriers to women’s advancement in the legal field had been overcome. As such, when Kishner began pulling late nights as a new associate more than 20 years ago, she was rewarded with challenging cases and substantial responsibility.

Having advanced to the position of senior attorney in subsequent years, Kishner went on to serve on her firm’s diversity committee, which worked to increase the presence of women and minorities at the firm. Based on this experience, Kishner believes that large firms possess a unique opportunity to advance diversity within the legal field.

“Large firms have large, institutional clients, which often have adopted their own diversity initiatives,” she explains. As such, these clients anticipate that their outside legal counsel will have employed lawyers of varying backgrounds.

Relatedly, Kishner notes that many clients are juggling the same demands as are lawyers. This commonality can serve to build the rapport between lawyer and client, and family functions are beginning to serve as an alternative to the traditional golf course for client networking.

Family needs are important to voters too. While Kishner was campaigning during the most recent judicial election, many prospective voters said that she demonstrated an ability to balance career and family, indicating that she was a high achiever. Thus, Kishner has observed that lawyers can find professional opportunities even while managing family obligations.

## Conclusion

A continued increase in female lawyers at large, national firms will certainly remain an important and valid goal. As demonstrated by the varied and accomplished careers of these four professionals, however, a distinguished career at a large law firm is just one of several ways women can achieve success in law. Therefore, to keep pace with the changing demographics of the legal profession, the definition of success must continue to evolve as well. ■

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