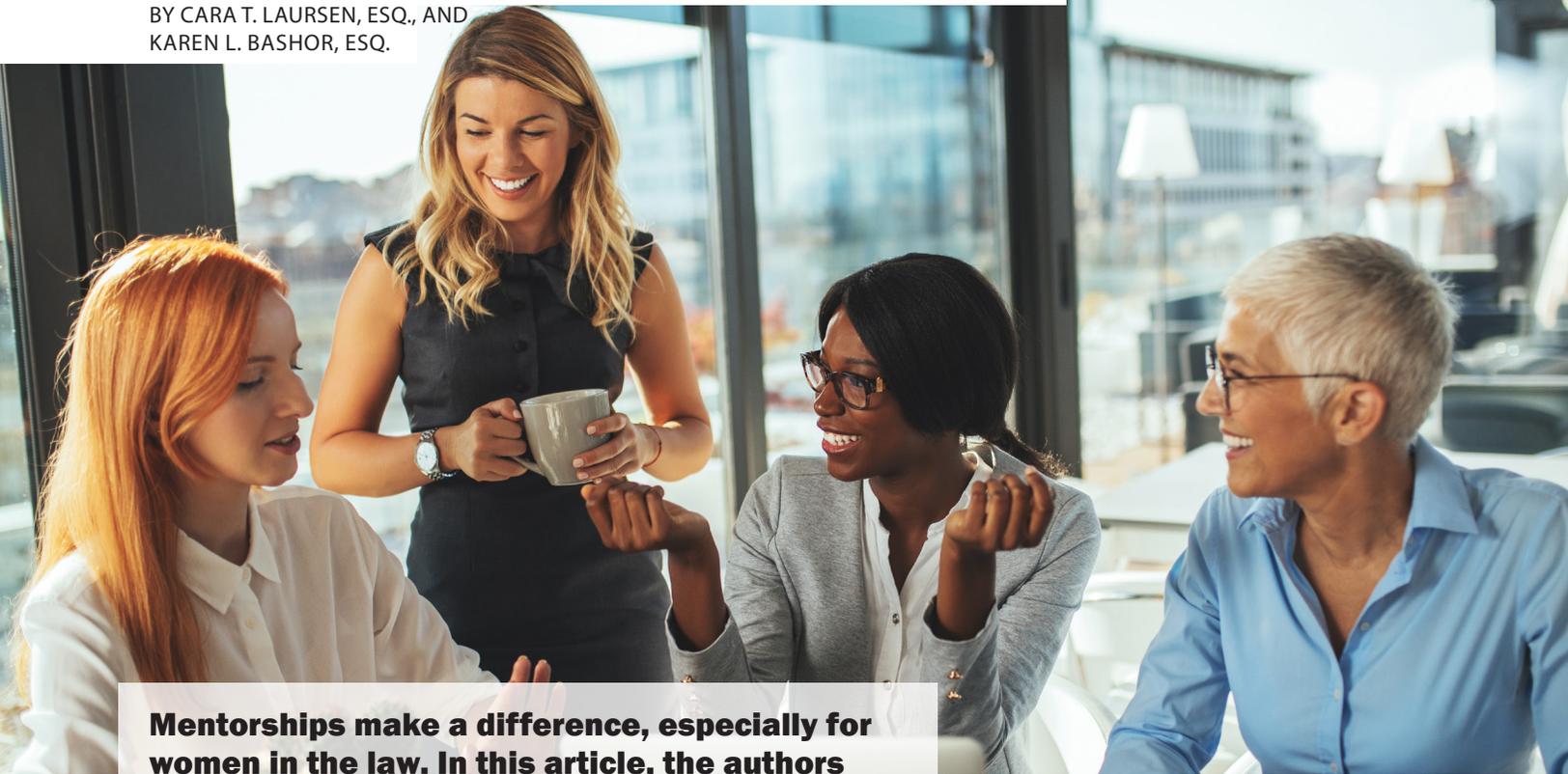


Mentorships Make a Difference

BY CARA T. LAURSEN, ESQ., AND
KAREN L. BASHOR, ESQ.



Mentorships make a difference, especially for women in the law. In this article, the authors examine the importance of mentorship in the legal profession and reflect on their experiences as mentor and mentee, discussing how that process has shaped and developed them.

Mentorship and the Law

Women in the legal industry face daunting challenges when it comes to handling the pressures of a predominately male profession. Women remain a minority, comprising only 38 percent of the profession's population as reported in a recent study by the American Bar Association (ABA).¹ However, significant strides have been made in recent years to increase the participation of women in the law. In fact, Nevada made history as the first state to have a majority of women holding seats in the Legislature in 2018.² In 2019, Nevada again made history as one of only 10 states with a Supreme Court made up of a majority of women justices.³ However, what can make a powerful impact on an attorney's career – particularly a female attorney – in handling the unique pressures they face? The answer is mentorship.

Women and the Practice of Law

The very nature of the legal profession lends itself to some recurring themes that female attorneys experience. For example, many believe that women consistently have to walk a fine line when it comes to advocacy on behalf of their

clients, having to perform a constant balancing act of being assertive, but not so much so that they appear aggressive or too emotional. Indeed, confidence with the right balance of humility is a difficult skill to develop. For that reason, female attorneys, in particular, need mentors to help them see what others see, warn of the pitfalls and provide guidance about finding their own authentic style.

According to a 2019 study by the ABA, since as early as 2014, female law students have outnumbered male law students—by 5,400 students—nationwide as of the 2018-19 academic year. However, licensed male attorneys outnumber female attorneys by a ratio of almost 2-to-1 nationwide for the same period. While there certainly is a multitude of factors that undoubtedly come into play to explain why law students either do or do not enter the profession, perhaps

this ratio is indicative of women’s tendency to be their own worst critics, either consciously or subconsciously underestimating their abilities.

Further, women face challenges when it comes to advancement in private practice. In 2019, it was reported that 45.91 percent of women were at the associate level while only 22.7 percent were at the partner level. A mere 19 percent of women were equity partners.⁴ The struggle for women to survive, succeed and sustain balance is indeed real, especially for mothers.

The Mentee’s Perspective – Laursen’s Story

Article co-author
Cara Laursen is an associate at the Wilson Elser law firm in Las Vegas. Entering the legal field, she knew early on that she would need a mentor to help navigate the challenges she would surely face as a new attorney. She recognized the importance of building professional relationships and the education to be gained from the experience of seasoned attorneys.

To be sure, Laursen’s path into the legal profession was a little unconventional. With an entertainment background, her first job was as a magician’s assistant, and she later became Miss Las Vegas—certainly a much different route to the law than most attorneys. She delayed going to law school and, when finally deciding to take the LSAT, she did so quietly, not wanting to give anyone the “I told you so” moment if she failed. But she didn’t fail.

Despite Laursen’s love of performing, once off stage, she tended to be naturally quieter and more reserved. So, when word got out that she was attending law school, she received unsolicited comments such as, “You really think you can pull this off?” or “You’re so shy. You really think you have what it takes to stand up in court and argue?”

Thankfully, Laursen had people in her court (pun intended) to support her

along her journey. The first mentor that she recalls was a professor in law school, who offered to be a tutor for her in a challenging course. She assumed there was some mistake but was reassured when the professor noted, “I remember you were the quiet blonde girl who sat in the corner of the lecture hall, but I know you can do this and I want you to do this.”

Laursen’s mentorship experience continued at the professional level while practicing law. After joining Wilson Elser, she encountered attorney Karen Bashor who, among others, understood and appreciated the significance of a mentorship relationship and stepped in to help Laursen as a working attorney.

Now, one of

Laursen’s professional goals is to become the mentor and, ultimately, to be a person who will make a difference in another young attorney’s career path.

The Mentor’s Perspective – Bashor’s Story

Article co-author

Karen Bashor is a partner at the Wilson Elser law firm and has been honored to serve

as a mentor, knowing first-hand the significance that mentoring has in life. Bashor credits mentors for helping her to develop as a well-respected lawyer and partner at a national law firm.

When Bashor joined her firm as a lateral in December 2016, its WAVE (Women Attorneys Valued & Empowered) program played a significant role in her decision, particularly as a new mother who wanted to be a “good mom” but was still hungry to also have a successful legal career. While Bashor began her career there as “of counsel,” she was elevated to partnership by January 2019, which was considered a significant success in a firm of more than 900 attorneys and given the rigorous standards for obtaining partner status.

Bashor credits her success with mentorship, both at the firm formally

through WAVE and through informal relationships, plus externally through organizations like the Southern Nevada Association of Women Attorneys (SNAWA), for helping her navigate her path to partnership. Through meaningful mentorship, she was empowered with important opportunities to be a leader regionally and nationally, learned to hone her skills, and was given the confidence to seize significant business opportunities. By the time Bashor was made a partner, she received strong support from attorneys across the country, including regional managing partners from Las Vegas, New Jersey, Maryland, New York and Texas, across various practice areas, including men and women of different races and ethnicities.

Meaningful mentorships have been integral to Bashor’s professional success. Based upon her experience, she seeks to mentor others in a manner that incorporates the key components that made a difference in her relationships, such as:

- Both parties investing dedicated time to the relationship on a regular basis;
- Encouraging different mentors from different backgrounds;
- Keeping lines of communication open and establishing trust and confidence;
- Setting items on an agenda to discuss, including goals and values, as well as concerns and challenges, so that the process is reflective, deliberative and instructive;
- Recognizing strengths and talents, providing the mentee with opportunities and guidance for success and celebrating accomplishments; and
- Elevating the relationship by becoming a sponsor to help promote advancement.

The Importance of Mentorship

These examples from the authors’ own experiences illustrate the importance of female attorneys having a mentor and supporter in their corner during their practice of law. Mentorship has been shown to be integral to the success of

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women in their professional development. Studies show that people with mentors who can provide effective career guidance are more likely to get promoted.⁶

Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” The guidance and expertise shared by a good mentor cannot be read in a textbook or manual. It must be absorbed through listening, internalizing, addressing challenges, and then putting them into practice.

Finding Your Mentor

Having a meaningful mentor is an indispensable element to continued success and growth in the legal field, so all attorneys, both male and female, should inquire within their own organizations and community for mentors and mentorship opportunities. It is important to mention that SNAWA has started a formal mentorship program and, as a former board member and mentor, Bashor promotes this program.

Together, in an environment of support and trust, all professionals could and should benefit from the mentorship relationships available to them.

KAREN L. BASHOR has significant litigation and trial experience with complex litigation, large transportation claims and catastrophic injury defense. She has successfully handled civil and criminal jury trials in state and federal court in Nevada and New Jersey. She is a proud member of Wilson Elser’s initiative dedicated to Women Attorneys Valued & Empowered (WAVE), and she serves as the Las Vegas regional representative. She has served on subcommittees to organize national WAVE programs, including the firm’s mentorship program.



CARA T. LAURSEN is an associate at Wilson Elser handling litigation in the areas of personal injury, complex tort, general casualty, and product liability defense. She is also a proud member of Wilson Elser’s WAVE program. She graduated in 2016 from California Western School of Law, magna cum laude, having received several academic accolades throughout her law school career. She is a member of the Clark County Bar Association, American Bar Association—Young Lawyers Division, and board member of the State Bar of Nevada’s Insurance & Health Law Section. She is excited and looks forward to her future with Wilson Elser and becoming more involved with the WAVE program.



1. *A Current Glance at Women in the Law*, April 2019, at 2, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/women/current_glance_2019.pdf.
2. Del Real, Jose A., “Nevada Becomes First State with Majority of Women in Assembly,” December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/nevada-majority-women-lawmakers.html>
3. Ritter, Ken, “Nevada Joins States with Female Majority on High Court,” January 11, 2019, <https://apnews.com/28940d6ef89f4b01af62a800a85d94bd>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Karen Bashor previously wrote an article in the October 2017 issue of the *Nevada Lawyer*, “Diversity Makes a Difference in the Profession” that shares more of her personal story and how her background has contributed to her success by offering unique perspectives.
6. Allen et al., “Career Benefits Associated with Mentoring for Proteges.”

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