



## Women, the Law, and Leaning into Leadership: North Central Florida Chapter Hosts Leadership Roundtable

On April 11, 2014, attorneys from all over the state of Florida came together to discuss an issue that affects us all: women, the law, and the female leadership gap in the legal profession. The idea for the event was born when Stephanie Marchman, chair of the Roundtable Planning Committee, was given a copy of Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* for Mother's Day 2013 and then attended a panel discussion on women in the law that fall.

The numbers are staggering: approximately half of all law students have been women since the early 1990s, but women lawyers make up only 4 percent of managing partners, 15 percent of equity partners, and 24 percent of federal district judges. Struck by the disparity between female representation and female leadership in the legal profession, Marchman began to talk about the issue. First she spoke with members of the North Central Florida Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. The response was overwhelmingly positive: nearly half the board joined the planning committee for a CLE on the topic. Next, Marchman spoke to members of the federal and state judiciaries, the Eighth Judicial Circuit Bar Association, the Josiah T. Walls Bar Association, the University of Florida Levin College of Law, the Clara Gehan Association for Women Lawyers, and the Florida Association for Women Lawyers. Attorneys everywhere agreed: this was a serious problem that deserved serious discussion. With each organization's generous contributions, attorneys, judges, and other legal professionals came to the table for one afternoon to discuss the female leadership gap in the legal profession.

The event opened with a presentation by Professor Jason Nance on gender diversity in the legal profession. Data from

Professor Nance's recent empirical study showed that women are vastly underrepresented in top-level jobs in the legal profession, especially in large metropolitan areas of the South. Further, the data showed that minority women were especially underrepresented among law firm partners. As recently as 2011, female representation was high among law firm associates, at 45.4 percent, but as low as 19.5 percent among law partners.

Following Professor Nance's presentation, distinguished lawyer leaders—including Hank Coxe, Mayanne Downs, Fred



Hon. Anne C. Conway, Hon. William Terrell Hodges, Hon. Marcia Morales Howard, and Hon. Gary R. Jones share their perspective on the female leadership gap.

Franklin, Nancy Hess, Tracey Jaensch, Kevin Johnson, John Jopling, Nicolle Shalley, and Jeanne Singer—took turns sharing their personal experience with the leadership gap in the legal profession. A federal judicial panel sparked the next round of discussion, including the Hon. Patricia D. Barksdale, the Hon. Sheri Polster Chappell, the Hon. Anne C. Conway, the Hon. William Terrell Hodges, the Hon. Marcia Morales Howard, the Hon. Gary R. Jones, the Hon. Philip R. Lammens, the Hon. M.

*Kate Artman graduated with honors from the University of Florida (UF) Levin College of Law in December 2013. While in law school, Artman was a student representative for the North Central Florida Chapter of the Federal Bar Association and president of the Federal Bar Law Student Association at UF Law. She is now an assistant state attorney in the Eight Judicial Circuit Court of Florida and plans to continue her involvement with the North Central Florida Chapter as a board member next year.*



Casey Rodgers, and the Hon. Karen K. Specie. Following each panel, the speakers joined discussion groups—each a combined mix of experienced lawyers, new lawyers, law students, and other legal professionals—to address the leadership gap. At the end of each discussion round, table moderators shared their table’s discussion with all attendees.

Discussion topics varied at each table, as did solutions. On the topic of professional confidence, table moderator Erin Jackson noted that women are often the harshest critics of other women, particularly in the workplace. Rather than criticize, she encouraged women to pull each other up to foster open dialogue about children, career plans, and accommodations. Similarly, table moderator Cherie Fine encouraged women to be brave and request the accommodations they need—and in the process, make the workplace a better environment for everyone. By contrast, table moderator Lea Johnston opined that employers—not employees—should carry the burden of discussing accommodations for men and women alike who struggle to balance work and family.

On the topic of law firms as businesses, table moderator Meshon Rawls called for a shift away from traditional billable hours—a notoriously burdensome system for women balancing motherhood and careers—and refocusing on other ways that female attorneys bring value to firms. Table moderator Susanne Bullard proposed an alternative solution to the billable hour predicament: institutional flexibility, so that women can work

remotely when needed and still fulfill their required hours. Table moderator Dawn Vallejos-Nichols provided yet another alternative: restructuring private firms to be more like government practice, accompanied with flexible hours.

Other attendees opined that the problem will solve itself with time. In the words of table moderator AuBroncee Martin, this is not a revolution; it is an evolution. Large numbers of female law students continue to enroll in school around the country and new attorneys have stronger mentor–mentee relationships, with male and female attorneys alike, than those that existed just a decade ago. Many attorneys are optimistic that the legal profession is changing, albeit slowly, and female leadership will soon be on the rise.

The most important lesson discussed at the leadership roundtable is the power of conversation. In one afternoon, dozens of attorneys, judges, and legal professionals came to the table to address a topic of utmost concern. And while no one identified a single solution to the problem, conversations started at discussion roundtables raised awareness of topics infrequently discussed. Now that the conversation has begun, we encourage everyone to continue it in their workplace: partners, talk to your associates about the quality of their work and the value they bring to your firm. Associates, talk to your bosses about accommodations you need to succeed in the legal profession. Students, talk to potential employers about your work and life goals; do not leave before you leave. The more we talk, the closer we come to finding a solution. ☉



Table moderator Marcy LaHart shares her table’s discussion with other attendees.



Stephanie Marchman, chair of the North Central Florida Chapter Membership and Planning Committee, presents a video clip titled “Great Expectations for Female Lawyers” from *The New York Times*.

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begin to imagine life had I not gone to that school, or life without my best friend, Mya, who could not have attended with me in a segregated classroom. Without the courts, society would not have changed for the better, and I would probably not be able to go to school with my best friend. Former Chief Justice Earl Warren said, “It is the spirit and not the form of law that keeps justice alive.” I believe that the evenhandedness and independence of federal courts is the spirit that keeps justice in the United States alive.

*Emma Ronzetti*

I congratulate and commend these students for their excellent work. I also thank the FJA and the FBA for the honor of leading this committee and for their continuing, combined efforts to teach civics to high school students, expose those students to the important work of the federal courts, and strengthen the relationship between the federal judiciary and the people it serves. ☉