

Daily Journal

COVER STORY

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Top Women Litigators

Leaps of Faith

Editor's Note

This year, we asked our honorees to consider a single turning point in their careers, a moment when success hinged on abandoning the familiar for the unknown.

Maybe it was forgoing a potentially lucrative career in another field. Perhaps it was diverging from a family practice to pursue a government job. Or it could have been assuming the lead chair in a complex trial.

As could be expected, the answers varied widely. But the message was clear. Most if not all of these remarkable women faced a point in their lives when doubt was the enemy, a moment that required unwavering faith in their abilities or judgment.

In many cases, sheer determination spawned a revelation or opportunity. It was clear: These advocates have achieved great success by confronting the unknown.

But the exercise also created a sort of blueprint, a road map for generations rising through the ranks of the legal profession.

"I walked off a cliff," Sonya Winner recalled of her task to open a San Francisco outpost of Washington, D.C.'s Covington & Burling.

Sometimes, those challenges originated from within.

"I recognized early on that I didn't have the stereotypical attributes of a good lawyer," said Elizabeth Cabraser, a San Francisco trial lawyer. "I saw I was going to have to get along on sincerity and dedication to the case."

Some of our honorees said their journeys had nothing to do with leaps — of faith or otherwise.

"The question is, 'Can I prove it?'" explained Los Angeles defense attorney Gigi Gordon. "A leap of faith is antithetical to the entire legal process, as it requires acquiring a belief without any empirical support."

Of course, many of our honorees continue to grapple with not just leaps into the unknown, but moving through all-too-familiar terrain. Studies continue to show that women still account for

Sonya D. Winner

San Francisco

Place of Birth: Mountain Home Air Force Base, Colo.

Law School: Harvard Law School

Law Firm: Covington & Burling

Practice Area: Antitrust and consumer law

Years in Practice: 24

Season ticket holders recently sued to stop the San Francisco 49ers from patting down fans entering the stadium, citing privacy rights.

A similar suit had succeeded in Florida, but Sonya Winner fended off a case in San Francisco County Superior Court by showing that plaintiffs consented to the inspections when they decided to buy the tickets. *Sheehan v. San Francisco 49ers*, 05-447679.

Winner can't discuss the case while an appeal is pending, but she allows that she's a pro football fan.

"I wish I got free tickets," she joked.

Her leap of faith occurred when she moved from Covington & Burling's Washington, D.C., office in 1999 to open the firm's new San Francisco shop.

"I'd never been here before," she said. "I walked off a cliff. I went from being second chair on all my cases to running the show. Exciting days for me."

Next up: Defending Bank of America in ATM fee antitrust litigation and Wells Fargo Bank in challenges to late and overlimit fees. Both are large, multidefendant class actions.

— John Roemer



less than 20 percent of all law firm partners. At the same time, they are jumping off the track to partnership at far higher rates than their male counterparts.

Indeed, though we like to think otherwise, equality between the sexes remains largely a myth. After all, how do we explain the fact that women abandon the pursuit of partnership largely because they are too busy juggling the duties of child care. Forget Mr. Mom — Women still rule the roost.

As a result, the path to success is often fraught with gender-specific hurdles.

Today's challenges remind us that bridging the gap between the known and the unknown requires courage and tenacity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the following pages, where many of the state's top women litigators shared those defining moment in their careers, when they leaped into the unknown purely on the belief, as so many of them told us, "that I could do it."

— Dan Schechner