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Women Lawyers Making History (Part 2)

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APRIL 2018 BAR BULLETIN

By **Dominique Scalia and Marti J. McCaleb**

Second of Three Parts

This month we continue our interviews with female attorneys at some of the largest firms in Washington. The initial impetus for this series, which premiered in the March issue, was International Women's Day on March 8.

Elizabeth A. Leedom

Secretary & former Co-managing Director Bennett Bigelow & Leedom, P.S.

Elizabeth Leedom was raised in Portland and never considered any professional endeavor other than the law. "I wanted to be a lawyer since I was in second grade and had no other career aspirations," she says. Until this year, she was the co-managing director of Bennett Bigelow & Leedom, where she has practiced health care litigation since 1996.

Q. How did you become a leader at your firm? Was it a goal of yours or how did the opportunity come to you? When you agreed to accept the position, what did you consider?

A. The opportunity came to me when three of our partners decided to leave to go to a larger firm. I considered the time commitment involved, but was in a good position with our four children grown and out of the house to devote more time to firm management.



Q. What are some of the biggest challenges of your role?

A. One of the biggest challenges was leading through a transition — calming anxieties, looking forward, maintaining commitment and consensus of the group. When I first became involved as a managing partner, it was a time of transition. Three partners had announced they were leaving. They didn't take all their staff, so I had the difficult first job as a managing partner to lay some staff people off. The firm also needed to downsize its offices and had to reassure clients. We made it through the transition well, and are back to the same number of attorneys we had before. With this transition, we decided to have two managing partners. We made this move due to the demands of our trial practice and the need to have at least one managing partner in the office most of the time.

Q. What are your hobbies? What are you reading?

A. My hobbies are golf and horse jumping. I am reading Ken Follett's new book, *Column of Fire*, and listening to an Audible book on improving self-discipline!

Q. There has been tremendous growth in King County recently. How has this changed the practice of law here?

A. The practice has gotten busier — more matters, more lawsuits, more clients.

Q. Do you have any thoughts or observations regarding national trends in the law? How are national trends affecting practice in King County?

A. I may not be up on all the national trends. I am seeing an increased emphasis on diversity in the work force, civility in the practice of law, and maintaining work-life balance despite the demands of the practice.

Q. What is the history of Bennett Bigelow & Leedom?

A. Our firm was formed in the early 1980s as a split off from a larger firm. We have always had an emphasis on health care law. In 1996, my husband and I came over from Williams Kastner & Gibbs. Our practice emphasized litigation related to health care.

Q. What is a piece of advice you received in your career that you found helpful? What is the worst advice you have received?

A. The best advice I received was to do my best to make each member of the team feel valued and respected. How? The key is personal contact. I usually eat lunch in the lunch room with the other employees. I regularly check in with people around the office. I try to send emails to give recognition. I try to make sure no one is rude to staff.

The worse advice I received as a young lawyer in the mid-1980s was to wear glasses in court even if I didn't need them then, because they would make me look "older and smarter." I took this bad advice from a trial consultant and lost the case. I immediately chucked the glasses in the trash while leaving the courtroom.

Angelia Wesch

Managing Partner Oles Morrison

Angelia Wesch grew up in Dallas, attended the University of Texas-Austin as an undergrad, and earned her law degree from Texas Tech. Between college and law school, she received a real estate license in New Mexico at the age of 19 and sold real estate during her summer breaks. “It was a strange job for someone that age,” she says, but the emphasis on contracts and financing was good preparation for her career in construction and real estate law. She worked for several years at a large Houston law firm, before moving to Washington in 1993.



Q. How did you become a leader at your firm? Was it a goal of yours or how did the opportunity come to you? When you agreed to accept the position, what did you consider?

A. I joined Oles Morrison about three years before becoming managing partner. There’s a perception that people seek this out, but in my experience, it’s more “the right person at the right time” — to find the person with the leadership skills and management experience who has the respect and confidence of their peers to be entrusted with the role of managing partner.

In deciding whether to accept the role, I wanted to look forward and imagine what the composition of our firm and our clients’ firms will look like in 20 years, reflecting changes in the Seattle market and the legal community; to take a hard-charging industry (like construction and law) and show that women play an important role, both now and in the future.

Q. What are some of the biggest challenges of your role?

A. Balancing viewpoints in a way that all feel represented. People will always have different opinions, and it is possible for two opposing viewpoints to both be right. You have to get outside yourself and your own opinions in order to lead people effectively.

Q. What are your hobbies? What are you reading?

A. I like to read, surf and hike, not necessarily in that order. My whole family surfs, so it’s an opportunity for us to get away, go to Hawaii, and do something together. Most recently, I finished reading *The Wave* by Susan Casey, about big-wave surfing, and I am presently tackling Ron Chernow’s biography of Ulysses S. Grant.

Q. There has been tremendous growth in King County recently. How has this changed the practice of law here?

A. Seattle is a beautiful place that offers unique natural beauty. People want to be here for that reason. At its heart, it’s a boom and bust gold rush town. Currently, I think we are poised for a spectacular run of success; but we should stop and evaluate what it is we’re doing and why. I’m frequently reminded of the dot com

bubble of the late '90s. This feels different, but there are certainly things that we should be watching. The reliance on tech money is concerning and the lack of diversification in certain key industries such as real estate is always a risk. It's exhilarating, but we need to think and understand the concentration of single-user owners and large tenants, and the ramifications of such rapid growth.

There are great opportunities here, but it takes real fortitude for a person or a business to survive and thrive here. Our opportunities are the flip side of the challenges we face. At Oles, we will likely be busy for 50 years and beyond with the infrastructure development that has come from the recent fast-paced growth. At the same time, we should think about the community we live in and how we can help shape a sustainable future where the things that initially attracted people to Seattle are preserved and respected.

Q. Do you have any thoughts or observations regarding national trends in the law? How are national trends affecting practice in King County?

A. Seattle is not insulated from the trend of mergers and consolidation, as global firms increase their market concentration in order to serve their clients. Lots of firms want to plant a flag here, but most are looking only at a few specific niche practices. I'm not convinced that the national trends — consolidation/outsourcing — are fully replicable here. Again, it's that Seattle gold rush mentality. People take risks to be here, and global law firms aren't really into risk.

Q. What is the history of Oles Morrison?

A. Oles is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year. The firm has deep roots in Seattle. The firm was originally founded by John Condon (whom the old University of Washington Law School was named after). We are a construction law firm. We offer other supporting practices and services — federal government contracting, insurance coverage — to serve our clients, but at the core, construction is what we do. Seattle has an exciting history and future for the construction industry, and Oles has been at the forefront of serving clients in the construction industry.

Q. What is a piece of advice you received in your career that you found helpful? What is the worst advice you have received?

A. My first mentor told me, "Don't listen to people who tell you not to take chances. Instead, seize the opportunities you see." It was the best advice I've ever received.

On the flip side, the worst advice ever came after I'd been practicing for about 20 years. I was on the firm's executive committee and had by many measures hit the "apex" of my career. It was at that point I decided I wanted to start my own firm. Some of my former colleagues said, "Why would you do that? You have everything you could want. Why take the risk?" We all have chapters in our lives. Starting a solo practice was the culmination of many factors — the timing was right, my children were older, I'd done everything I wanted to do at my old firm, and I needed to explore the challenge. Within a year, we had two offices and had doubled the staff. Again, the challenge was the opportunity.

If I had one piece of advice to pass on, I would remind everyone building (or rebuilding/remaking) their careers to pay careful attention to the relationships you create. They ultimately will provide what type of story you will tell.

Graciela Cowger

Chief Executive Officer Schwabe Williamson & Wyatt

Graciela Cowger was born in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, and grew up in Tijuana. She was an electrical engineer before attending law school, having earned an electrical engineering degree in 1989 from San Diego State University. After working for Hewlett Packard for several years in various functional areas, she lost her passion and decided to study intellectual property law. That brought her to the University of Washington School of Law.



Q. How did you become a leader at your firm? Was it a goal of yours or how did the opportunity come to you? When you agreed to accept the position, what did you consider?

A. I worked at a boutique firm for about 10 years after graduating from law school. I made partner, managed the firm, and then decided to start my own firm with two other partners. We founded Stolowitz Ford Cowger, which merged with Schwabe in 2015. At that time, Schwabe's leadership team, including co-managing partners who had led the firm for about 17 years, were charting the future success of the firm. They envisioned a bold shift in leadership — appointing a single CEO who could dedicate 100 percent of their focus to our clients and the success of the firm.

The nomination process opened in early 2017 and I decided to participate with the hope that I would learn something about myself and my aspirations, as well as develop a deeper understanding of the firm and its future. At first, I questioned whether I wanted to become CEO because I was concerned that I had not been at the firm for very long and, thus, did not know all of the partners well. I had managed two firms before, but never managed a firm having this scale, size and complexity. Going through the CEO selection process confirmed that I had the skills to do the job and revealed that I really wanted this very interesting and challenging position at a highly successful and innovative firm.

Prior to taking the position, I weighed its effect on my family including the delicate balancing act of two working parents. I was not particularly surprised that my husband, daughter and son were very supportive and excited to see me lead Schwabe. I also considered the need to give up my practice, which I had spent 20 years building, to focus full-time on management. I knew the position came with a steep learning curve and it would be a taxing job in many ways. On balance, I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to lead this great firm.

Q. What are some of the biggest challenges of your role?

A. Schwabe will continue to build on its tradition of being a bold and innovative firm. To create a culture where attorneys are deeply embedded in the industries they serve and come to work every day in an environment where the team is contributing to innovation, positively recognizing each other, and being generous with praise and in working relationships. I motivate people by modeling positive leadership and adding constant energy to the ecosystem of the firm. Setting a positive, supportive and inviting culture is a top priority.

Q. What are your hobbies? What are you reading?

A. I'm great at Pinterest fails — bedazzling did not work out for me! I enjoy photography and attending my kids' sports games. They play soccer, basketball, baseball and football — sometimes all in the same day. I just finished reading Thomas Friedman's Thank You For Being Late, and before that Grit by Angela Duckworth.

Q. There has been tremendous growth in King County recently. How has this changed the practice of law here?

A. The influx of people and businesses and the Amazon effect have expanded the work we are doing in technology, real estate and construction. Health care is another area in which we see substantial growth.

Q. Do you have any thoughts or observations regarding national trends in the law? How are national trends affecting practice in King County?

A. The women's movement stands out as impacting not only our firm's practices and policies but also the world we live in locally or nationally. I am optimistic that the current dialogue will shape how we view opportunities and how women develop professionally.

Rapid technological change in communication mechanisms, for example, has dramatically changed the manner and urgency with which we communicate with our clients. More generally, law firms must adapt to keep up with these rapid technological changes or risk being left behind.

Q. What is Schwabe's history?

A. Schwabe is over 125 years old and has always been quite progressive. The firm is poised to continue to be progressive, but also adapt, change and be innovative. We're focused on how we deliver services based off of the unique needs of our clients' industries. We pride ourselves in specializing in industries so we see what our clients see.

Q. What is a piece of advice you received in your career that you found helpful? What is the worst advice you have received?

A. The most helpful advice I've received occurred on the eve of the CEO selection process when I asked a friend whether I should participate. She smartly noted that, at that time, no one was offering me the job, just the opportunity to go through the process. That advice helped me become a CEO.

In much of my professional life as an engineer first and then as an attorney, I've been the only female — always surrounded by men. I did not have the benefit of having female mentors particularly early in my career. In this context, I have not received bad advice as much as comments that were sometimes either sexist, racist, or that made uncomfortable. My circumstances have made me incredibly resilient, a characteristic that has served me well as Schwabe's CEO. Resilience allows me to take more risk, knowing that if I fail, I will be able to get up, try again, and move forward.

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