

Connecting, Networking, Mentoring MAMAS

By Christina Gerrish Nelson

A little more than 60 years ago, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor graduated from Stanford Law School at the top of her class,¹ and Judge Betty Binns Fletcher graduated from the University of Washington School of Law at the top of her class.² Despite their stellar academic performance, neither of them could find work as a lawyer because of their gender.

Women just were not part of the legal landscape. Justice O'Connor and Judge Fletcher nonetheless persevered in their respective legal careers while raising their children (Justice O'Connor had two boys; Judge Fletcher had two boys and two girls). In 1979, Judge Fletcher was appointed to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and in 1981 Justice O'Connor was the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.³

Justice O'Connor and Judge Fletcher, and other women lawyers and mother lawyers like them, have brought the idea that one can be a woman, a mother and a lawyer from laughable to everyday reality. While there is much left to be done to reach the type of equality that many of us crave and dream about, issues facing women lawyers and mother lawyers, and diversity in general, are now common topics of discussion in many law firms, businesses, courts, government entities and practice groups.

One does not have to look far anymore to find substantive and meaningful dialogue about bringing women lawyers into parity with their male counterparts in terms of pay, advancement and recognition of their work in the legal profession. But even though ideas for the advancement and promotion of women lawyers are on the table, at the end of the day many of us can't help but feel marginalized and trapped in our own circumstances, with the impending thought that perhaps the big policy questions just don't apply to our own little piece of the legal world.

There does not always seem to be an option in our immediate job or life situation to do anything about national issues facing women lawyers and mother lawyers. In fact, it often feels like there does not seem to be any room to do anything other than survive day to day.

For me, this was especially noticeable after the birth of my first child, when I suddenly realized that the traditional notions of law firm practice had a different agenda for my life than my daughter did. I often hear the sentiment and have felt it myself: Really, what *can* I do? What am I even *able* to do?

While the big answer to these small questions may be beyond the confines of this short article, the small answer to these big questions has a very manageable and practical first step. Get connected. Plug in. Link up. Lean in. However you want to say it and on whatever level you can do it.

As mother lawyers (and women lawyers, but being a mother lawyer is my particular vantage

point for this article), many of us cannot achieve professional connections through traditional networking routes that work for our male counterparts and worked for our predecessors. More and more, we have to find our own way to network, to reenergize, to progress in our careers. We have to be creative and think outside the box.

Good news: MAMAS gets it. Recognizing that a conventional approach to networking may not be attainable for many mother attorneys, the Mother Attorneys Mentoring Association of Seattle (MAMAS, www.mamaseattle.org) works diligently to facilitate new ways for mother attorneys to connect and network, and advance their careers. Building connections is an essential element in lawyer development and success, and MAMAS embraces this principle by providing a multitude of opportunities for its members to connect, network and mentor one another, including:

- **MAMAS Listserv:** On the MAMAS Listserv, MAMAS members actively seek referrals and network, post jobs, discuss issues that arise as a mother attorney, and share articles and information pertinent to women lawyers.
- **LinkedIn:** MAMAS members also have access to a LinkedIn group, which similarly connects LinkedIn MAMAS members with networking, job postings, and discussions of current articles, information and MAMAS events.
- **Networking Events:** MAMAS hosts monthly networking events with kids, which are well attended and provide a unique opportunity for networking in a venue where kids are welcomed.
- **Lean In and Networking Groups:** Multiple clusters of 10–12 MAMAS members are part of *Lean In* circles (co-sponsored with KCWWL) and networking groups (focused exclusively on networking, without the *Lean In* emphasis), to increase the connections and networking ability found in connecting on a more personal level.
- **Brown Bags:** MAMAS hosts monthly brown bag lunches on pertinent topics trending for women attorneys and mother attorneys, where MAMAS members connect in person and also can attend by phone.
- **CLE Programs:** MAMAS members present at high-quality CLE programs, designed to be accessible for busy mother attorneys, a low-cost way to fulfill CLE credits and for MAMAS members to build and connect with one another on a professional level.
- **Mentoring Program:** MAMAS has a one-on-one mentoring program where law students and new lawyer mothers, as well as soon-to-be and first-time mothers who are more established as lawyers, are connected with a mentor for advice and encouragement on navigating life as a mother attorney.

MAMAS programs provide a jumping off point for its 430-plus members to connect with one another and reap the benefits of building a networking base with other MAMAS members. The consistent and expanding participation in and support of the above programs (and other programs that MAMAS is constantly adding and updating) speak for themselves. MAMAS members are connecting online and in person, networking in a whole new way and mentoring one another.

There is still much to talk about and work at regarding the significant issues facing women lawyers and mother lawyers, as well as diversity in the legal profession in general. And we should absolutely continue such a conversation and keep momentum.

We are on a path that was started by and continues to be led by some amazing women (and men), and we cannot stop now. But when we find ourselves asking whether there really is anything that we can do, particularly as we build our own careers and continue down our own

paths, there is always at least one unequivocal answer to that question: Get connected.

One day our mold-breaking methods of connecting and networking will be the new normal, just as trailblazers such as Justice O'Connor and Judge Fletcher created their own new normal 60 years ago by simply being determined to find a job.

Christina Gerrish Nelson has an active practice in construction and commercial litigation and mediation (www.cgn-law.com), and is the mother of a 6-year-old girl and almost 3-year-old boy who love to attend MAMAS networking events. Nelson is the 2014 president of the MAMAS Board of Directors and is inspired by the many women lawyers and mother lawyers whom she works with through MAMAS and in her practice.

1 Sandra Day O'Connor, <http://www.biography.com/people/sandra-day-oconnor-9426834> (last visited Feb. 10, 2014).

2 "Judge Betty Binnes Fletcher, a Trailblazer for Women in Law, Dies at Age 89," <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2012/10/24/judge-betty-binnes-fletcher-a-trailblazer-for-women-in-law-dies-at-age-89> (last visited Feb. 10, 2014).

3 See supra.

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