

CONTINUING THE STATEN ISLAND WOMEN'S BAR ASSOCIATION TRADITION

Anne Taylor & Manju Sunny, November 2014

“WOMEN WEARING PANTSUITS ARE PROHIBITED FROM ENTERING THE COURTROOM” signs were still in vogue when women lawyers from around New York State began gathering in the late 1970’s to address professional concerns and to confront gender bias. Several Staten Island women attorneys were actively involved in the early days of what was to become the Women’s Bar Association of the State of New York (WBASNY). The Staten Island Chapter of the Women’s Bar Association became one of only five founding WBASNY Chapters.

Staten Island matrimonial attorney, and general practitioner, Ann O’Halloran was a “leading light” in the creation of WBASNY, and became the Staten Island Women’s Bar Association’s first President. Each of the other Staten Island Women’s Bar Association (SIWBA) founding members Karen McGee, Barbara Crawford and Carolyn Halk went on to also serve as Chapter presidents.

In those early days, as now, the Staten Island Women’s Bar met where they were welcomed. Meetings were held in court chambers, in jury rooms and in the homes of members. One early member, the Hon. Ruth McBrien (Family Court [’76-’77], Criminal Court [’77-’98] and Acting Supreme Court [’94-’98]), sometimes hosted the annual installation of SIWBA Officers in her home. Typically, Staten Island Chapter meetings had a business period followed by a continuing legal education presentation from a local practitioner. In the days, before legal education credits were required of attorneys, the Women’s Bar Association led the way in offering substantive half-day, and full-day Continuing Legal Education programs.

The running and creation of the Staten Island Women’s Bar was a team effort. Besides Ann O’Halloran, Karen McGee, Barbara Crawford and Carolyn Halk, there was also Sharon Lynch Norton who helped write the SIWBA By-Laws. Judy Wagner, now a partner in her own law firm, in the early days helped organize refreshments, served as Chapter Secretary, and later, served as the President of the Chapter.

Not very long after its formation the Staten Island Women’s Bar became an important community resource. The Women’s Bar pioneered attorney referrals on Staten Island with a lawyer referral panel. In its early days the client referral service was managed by Carolyn Halk, when she was newly out of Cardozo Law School. In 1982, SIWBA members were instrumental in overcoming the attempt by the Power Authority of the State of New York (“PASNY”) to place a coal-burning power plant in Travis. Thanks to the efforts of Staten Island Women’s Bar members Carolyn Halk, Karen McGee, Paul Hollander, Andrew B. McGee, Joel Pangborn, and Catherine M. Paulo, the Power Authority’s certificate to operate was declared invalid. (Yes, there were a lot of men members of the Women’s Bar back then!)

SIWBA has become an active member of the Staten Island community. Since the 1990s, SIWBA members have continuously participated in the Judges and Lawyer’s Breast Cancer Alert (JALBCA) program. For many years now, Women’s Bar members have also enthusiastically supported the American Cancer Society’s very well attended "Making Strides" Walk.

On the fundraising side, in 1992, the SIWBA sponsored the first of its highly successful Annual Golf Outings, slightly tongue-in-cheek themed “The Queen and Her Court.” In keeping with the theme, each foursome contained a Judge, or Justice, but more importantly, each foursome included a woman with three men. The Golf Outing continued annually for twelve years. The last several Golf Outings were dedicated to the memory of our founding member, and Past President, Ann C. O’Halloran.

Since the Holiday Reception’s beginning, SIWBA’s Annual Holiday Reception in honor of the Island’s Judiciary has been an important part of Staten Island’s legal calendar. Recent Holiday Reception honorees have included Justice Philip Minardo, Judge Philip Straniere, Justice Robert Gigante, Administrative Judge Judith McMahon, and Justice Barbara Panepinto. Tonight’s honoree, Justice Kim Dollard, continues the Staten Island Women’s Bar tradition of honoring Staten Island’s judiciary for their ongoing commitment to empowering Staten Island’s women attorneys.