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GRAWA PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The importance of mentoring in the legal profession

By **HEIDI SCHULT GREGORY**
Daily Record Columnist

The mission of the Greater Rochester Association for Women Attorney (GRAWA), simply stated, is to promote, support and encourage the advancement of women attorneys in their careers.

GRAWA has long recognized the importance of mentoring in the legal profession, and considers mentoring one of the keys (if not, the key) to advancing women in the profession. In order to successfully carry out its mission, mentoring is at the heart of all GRAWA does.

By mentoring, I refer to the relationship that forms between a more seasoned attorney, the mentor, and a less experienced one, the mentee. The mentor provides feedback, guidance and advice, and acts as a support or, even better, a role model in various situations that challenge a less experienced lawyer in her professional life. The mentee learns valuable lessons from her mentor, and generally is more prepared to face the challenges of practicing law. The mentee feels supported, knows she can go to her mentor for help on a particular matter and/or seek career advice or assistance before a problem arises. Mentoring, of course, can take shape in a less formal program or structure, simply by social connections and networking within an organization.

GRAWA's emphasis on mentoring cannot be understated. It is the core of our organization's work, by and through formal programming as well as informal means. GRAWA's Mentoring Committee, this year led by Jacqueline Phipps Polito and Julie Jordan, matches mentors with interested mentees based on experience, practice area and other factors. Last year, GRAWA fostered more than 35 such partnerships, and many of those pairings are continuing thanks to the strong bond that developed between the attorneys. The committee also plans and organizes various programs and social activities throughout the year for the mentors/mentees to come together and meet with others on the committee.

About two years ago, GRAWA's Diversity Committee and the Rochester City School District's Law Academy (led by GRAWA member Jack Hurley) partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Rochester to create an intense, yet rewarding mentoring program. Female students at John Marshall High School who hope to become lawyers are matched with GRAWA mentors who act as positive role models and provide experiences designed to enable the students to achieve their academic and career goals. GRAWA's Diversity Committee, led by co-chairpersons Connor O'Brien and Jacia Smith, is actively engaged in the mentor recruitment process. The committee's members understand how important the program is to the young Law Academy students. It is a wonderfully successful program that adds much to the lives of both the students and their GRAWA mentors.



In recognition of the importance of forming personal connections and as a tribute to the life of the late VLSP Executive Director Hanna S. Cohn, in 2002 GRAWA established the Hanna S. Cohn Mentoring Award. Hanna was passionate about many facets of the legal system and was a tireless contributor to our local legal community. One of her many gifts was an ability to relate and connect effortlessly with people, especially those just starting out in their careers. She found common ground with younger attorneys, formed personal connections and made a positive impact on the lives of those with whom she connected. Her actions, even the casual ones, served as lessons for those women. GRAWA's Cohn award recognizes a female attorney who has mentored, inspired and nurtured young women as they enter and begin their legal professions. Past recipients include Hon. Ann E. Pfeiffer, Hon. Evelyn Frazee, Catherine M. Callery, Hon. Karen Morris, Diane Cecero and Elizabeth Wolford — all of whom personally and professionally value the importance of mentoring.

GRAWA's Newly-Admitted Women Attorneys Committee, led by Julie Bielecki and Katie Courtney, was created recently, in part, to build relationships and enhance young women attorney's development through mentoring and networking. The target group is members 32 years of age or younger or members with less than five years' experience. The committee will host a series of informal discussions with themes such as "the top 10 things I wish I knew before starting out" and will ask GRAWA members to facilitate discussions and provide advice to newer attorneys based on their own personal and professional experiences. Similarly, GRAWA's Non-traditional Attorneys' Committee, led by Laura Taylor, provides non-practicing attorneys or those working in non-traditional settings with opportunities to network and remain connected with the local legal community. To facilitate connections, the committee has planned monthly social events that are open to all GRAWA members. An online discussion group also has been launched.

The Family and Careers Committee was resurrected by GRAWA about six years ago in order to provide informal mentoring and networking opportunities to GRAWA's working parents. Led by Kathleen Carter and Maria (Mili) Herrero-Jaarsma, the committee has grown in size year after year. It meets monthly and provides members with social and emotional support with respect to the challenges of balancing home life and careers. Quarterly discussions, typically centered on substantive topics facing working parents and families, also are hosted.

Heidi Schult Gregory is a member of the Pittsford-based law firm Harris Beach PLLC, where she serves on the Health Care Providers Industry Team as well as the Business and Commercial Litigation Practice Group. She is GRAWA's 26th president.