

# Raising A Gavel

BY LORI ROMER



## for Women's Equality

When Sarah Rosenberg applied to the University of Maryland School of Law in 1917, the dean denied her admission because there were no restrooms for women. Three years later, there still were no women's restrooms. But there were women students. The first group of females admitted to the School walked across the street to use the facilities in the School of Medicine.

Ninety-two years after Sarah Rosenberg's application, the School has come a long way. Today, the dean of the School, half of the faculty, and almost 60 percent of the students are women. But there are still barriers that prevent women lawyers from rising to leadership positions in the male-dominated profession.

Paula Monopoli, JD, recognizes those challenges and is working to overcome them. In 2003 she created the Women, Leadership, and Equality Program at the School to "address the wide gap between the number of women graduating from law schools and the few women in formal leadership positions at the top of the profession—fewer than 25 percent of partners and judges are women," says Monopoli.

The program is the first and only one of its kind at any American law school. So far, 32 students have taken part as Rose Zetzer Fellows. The fellowship is named for Zetzer, a 1925 School of Law graduate who fought for two decades—from 1927 to 1946—before being accepted into the Maryland State Bar Association. Maryland was the last state in the country to admit women to its state bar association.

Monopoli, Marbury Research Professor of Law at the School, describes the program as being built around three

major components—theory, application, and experience. "I designed an interdisciplinary theory seminar that the fellows take in their second year. The seminar integrates law, political science, and philosophy as well as leadership scholarship."

Monopoli notes that the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership on the College Park campus has collaborated with the School in the development of the program's curriculum. "The fellows are well-grounded in theory before they take the applied workshop in their third year and work in women's policy organizations."

A major goal of the program is to foster scholarship on the gendered nature of law and the legal profession.

"We need only look to the United States Supreme Court for an illustration of how we go two steps forward and one step back in terms of full representation in our profession," says Monopoli.

Karen H. Rothenberg, JD, MPA, dean of the School, cites troubling statistics about the influence of women in top legal circles.

"Less than 5 percent of the nation's largest law firms are led by women managing partners and only 16 percent of Fortune 500 companies have women as general counsel. And while our current Congress holds the record for the highest-ever female representation, 16 percent is no cause for celebration," she says.

"This law school is committed to true gender equality in the legal profession—not just in numbers, but also in terms of preparing all of our students, women and men alike, to become leaders, in whatever career they choose."



*Paula Monopoli (green binder) is preparing women law students to overcome gender barriers.*

As the program celebrates its fifth anniversary, Monopoli sees it as a critical resource to help female students develop the essential communication, personal negotiation, networking, and management skills necessary to rise to leadership positions.

“We give them the ability to have their ideas heard and implemented within their organizations at every stage of their careers. Building credibility, expertise, and the ability to get their ideas heard—even as first-year lawyers—enables them to exercise informal leadership as they move along the path to formal leadership. It helps them be valued by their employers, and my hypothesis is that women will stay where they are valued,” says Monopoli.

She cites a study that found new lawyers have 13 weeks to establish their reputations in a firm. “Our students are able to hit the ground running when they enter the profession and are at a significant advantage in terms of understanding the dynamics of the workplace as well as bringing excellent analytical skills to the table.”

Alexina Jackson, JD '07, is now thriving in her new environment and credits the program with honing her skills.

“When I started at the law firm, I quickly diagnosed the dynamics in which I am operating and thought about how to maximize my opportunities in that environment,” says the 31-year-old associate at Crowell & Moring LLP in Washington, D.C. “I was aware of what I wanted and the compromises I was willing to make, and so I now spend more of my time executing my goals rather than trying to understand them.”

Working with Professor Jana Singer, JD, Monopoli has built the program to expose students to behavioral and organizational issues that are typically found in an MBA program at business schools but which have never been part of the traditional law school curriculum.

“Law schools teach students how to think like lawyers,” Monopoli says, “but have traditionally taught them little about the organizations within which they will use those analytical skills. Our program tries to bridge that gap.”

Workshops on negotiation, public speaking, setting professional goals, and overcoming obstacles give students a concrete foundation for their burgeoning skills.

For Nina Schichor, JD '08, who is currently clerking for the Hon. Andre M. Davis, JD '78, of the U.S. Federal District Court of Maryland, the workshop on negotiation not only had a major impact on her, but on her fellow students as well.

“The workshop particularly resonated with me because I learned a practical skill that I could immediately implement in my own life,” says Schichor, 28. “In fact, soon after the class I found myself negotiating things that prior to the class I considered non-negotiable.” Intrigued, Schichor went on to conduct research in the field of gender and negotiation and later taught a workshop at the School in honor of Women’s History Month.

Fellows also participate in externships with organizations that work on women’s policy issues. Lisa Yonka Stevens, JD '04, an associate at Dickstein Shapiro LLC in Washington, D.C., says the best aspect of the program was her work at the

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— Paula Monopoli

Dean Karen H. Rothenberg (pink), Paula Monopoli (center) and the Rose Zetzer Fellows. From left: Ellen Smith, Adena Laufer, Jennifer Katz, Liz Child, and Nina Schichor.



National Women’s Law Center.

“By working at a legal organization filled with many dedicated and successful female attorneys, I saw firsthand the positive impact that women have on the legal community,” says Yonka Stevens, 30. “Not only was the work on the cutting edge, but the lifetime contacts have been invaluable.”

Monopoli and Singer are now studying just how the School’s alumnae build that network and how both male and female graduates balance their personal and professional goals.

In conjunction with the Project for Attorney Retention at the University of California’s Hastings College of Law, the professors are conducting a five-year study of all law school alumni to better understand the impact of work-family balance on women’s careers and the effect of workplace structure on career satisfaction.

“What are the factors that graduates view as most important as they chart their careers: compensation, rewarding work, valued colleagues, job flexibility?” asks Singer.

“We hope to correlate employment settings with satisfaction levels, and offer suggestions for legal employers—who are quite concerned with retention issues—about what would make lawyers want to stay,” she says.

Monopoli says the research and the program itself could not continue without the support of many people. She credits Rothenberg, the School’s faculty, and its alumnae, as well as the Marjorie Cook Foundation and Network 2000, two organizations that are dedicated to advancing women’s equality, for making the commitment to ensuring women’s full participation in the profession.

For Rothenberg, the commitment to women is evident at

the School—and not just because of the high number of women students and faculty.

“I am not alone in this,” she says. “Of the School’s eight associate and assistant deans, the majority are women. It’s embodied in our students, all of whom receive the opportunities to join our community and to thrive without regard to gender or race. And it’s shown in the creation of our Women, Leadership, and Equality Program.”

Monopoli knows an ongoing challenge for the program is confronting the very slow progress of women’s advancement in the profession and the persistent structural barriers in law firms.

She points to a recent report by the Women’s Bar Association of the District of Columbia that shows at the current rate of progress, it would be 2115 before women partners make up 50 percent of firm leadership. Monopoli says the study debunked many of the myths that circulate about the advancement of women, including the so-called “pipeline myth.”

That myth presupposes that once there are enough female law school graduates they will naturally ascend to higher positions. The study notes that since 1985 some 40 percent of those entering the profession have been women, but there has been little progress at the top.

“The incremental nature of the changes we can make does get discouraging sometimes,” Monopoli says. “But I encourage my students to work on parallel tracks—to use the skills they’ve learned in the program to move effectively into leadership positions so that they will have power. And power is what is essential to create broader systemic change that will better enable women to become an integral part of the legal profession at all levels.”