

2017 NJWLA Gala Speech

Welcome to the New Jersey Women Lawyers 10th Annual Platinum WILL Gala and thank you for supporting the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association and all of its efforts to help women in the profession. It is an exciting night for all of us. I'd like to extend heartfelt congratulations to all of our very accomplished Honorees. They deserve our recognition and praise and so much more. Each has made a significant contribution to advancing women in our profession and they are phenomenal role models. I'd also like to recognize their guests because there is no doubt that they significantly aided each Honoree in succeeding in her professional pursuits. I'd also like to welcome our distinguished guests – too many to mention - but thank you for taking the time to support NJWLA.

We have a number of people to thank this evening. Let me begin by thanking our generous sponsors. We are deeply appreciative of your support because without you, we would not be able to put on this wonderful event. Your sponsorship also allows NJWLA to award scholarships to deserving students at New Jersey's law schools and permits NJWLA to provide grants to organizations who like NJWLA, work hard to help others. This year's Grants Recipients are: NJ LEEP, Inc: Legal Diversity Young Women's Pipeline Program; Ms. JD; People's Preparatory Charter School; and National Association of Women Judges. Thanks also to our Grants Committee for the many hours spent finding the best recipients to support our efforts to help others while advancing our mission. Since NJWLA began to award grants in 2013, we have donated \$150,000 to charities aligned with our mission.

I'd also like to thank all of the Judges and Justices for attending this evening. The judiciary assists us in our professional development endeavors, and participate in programs such as the Nuts and Bolts Program, the Tales from the Bench Series and our annual Judicial Panel Seminar. I'd also like to thank the other bar associations -the state bar and the affinity bars -who partner with us to put on programs and events. Representatives from many of these organizations are here tonight in support of NJWLA. I'd also like to thank our Board for all of your efforts in reaching back and pressing forward. You are a great group and I cannot thank you enough for all of your hard work as we work together to make a difference to help the women in New Jersey's legal community. I'd like to single out our President- Elect, Annmarie Simeone and our immediate past president, Jessica Allen who have been tremendous help to me. Finally, I would like to recognize and thank our Executive Director, Colleen Skinner for her extraordinary efforts to support NJWLA. This fabulous Gala and all of our important programs would not be possible without her.

For those who don't know me, most would describe me as an open book. However, I am going to tell you a very embarrassing story about myself that almost no one knows. In fact, I think only my immediate family is aware of this tale and I have sworn them to secrecy for years. Here is where my husband starts to slide down in his seat and our three teen age children are for the first time in their lives thanking their lucky stars that they have too much homework and could not attend tonight. If they were here, by the end of this, they'd surely be hiding under the

table, thoroughly embarrassed. It all starts when I was young and struggled with swimming lessons. After my failed attempts at becoming a proficient swimmer, the movie JAWS came out a few years later and open water swimming was a thing of the past for me. I became deathly afraid to go in open water. Hence, it came as no surprise, that many years later, I had a very difficult time using my doggy paddle style to get to safety while on a trip with my husband because I could not swim a mere 30 yards. He refers to it as the near drowning incident. Leaping forward through my life into my early 40s, I started to do early morning workouts with a group of women who thought we should all do a triathlon together at Sandy Hook National Park. Now at this time, my children were young and taking swimming lessons with me urging them to keep trying their best because they did not want to be a failure at swimming like Mom. So, after some deep soul searching, I realized that I could no longer be a hypocrite by foisting swimming lessons on my children when I could not swim myself. Much to my surprise, a number of the women signed up for the triathlon fessed up to being lousy swimmers so we took swimming lessons at the local YMCA to prepare for the triathlon. I was still not proficient but thought I could get through it. Triathlon day arrived. I was a wreck but determined and miraculously I was able to navigate the half mile swim through the bay at Sandy Hook.

I had worked hard to eliminate an irrational, but deep intense fear, that really was part of me. My point in telling you this very embarrassing story is that I made up my mind to overcome and eliminate this great fear from my life. I venture a guess that all in this room believe that we could each improve something in our lives. I think that most of the people in this room think we could improve the legal profession. I suggest that we could improve our profession by working toward the elimination of unconscious gender bias.

For a number of years, the number of men and women becoming law school graduates has been nearly equal. Yet, statistics continue to show that in the general counsel's offices, in corporate C-suites, in highest positions in academia, government, the judiciary and law firms, the number of women are still but a small percentage. Most members of the profession agree that there must be a change yet many seem to be lost on how to make that change happen.

Like most, our profession needs to become gender blind to move women forward. A leading example of the impact of gender blindness comes from the way five prominent orchestras in the United States changed their hiring practices. In 1974, the female membership in these orchestras was only 4%. A decision was made to evaluate pursuing membership by listening to them as they played behind a curtain. After all, the music and ability to play the music, was what was most important. Now, those same five orchestras have 40% female membership. The new members were chosen based on their ability to perform, not based on their gender. As soon as the conductors put blinders on, the orchestras moved much closer to gender equality.

To achieve gender equality, the legal community should follow the lead of the orchestra conductors. Eliminating unconscious gender bias is difficult. For many, it is hard to even recognize as it is so woven into the fabric of our society. Recognition is the first step. If we start by becoming more self-aware and make efforts to treat all people the same, we will make progress. I urge each of you to advocate for unconscious bias training in your workplace. Strive to become gender blind in your hiring practices, in the way work is assigned to attorneys, and in

your promotion practices. When you have the chance to make things better, take it. We can see change when we lead by example. Challenge yourself to recognize the bias. Challenge those around you. Once you see it, seek to drive it out.

Next, take the steps to evaluate colleagues by their performance and not by their gender. Take further steps to mentor and inspire your female colleagues. Select them for the team to handle a new matter and when they are ready, have them lead the team. Push them to reach higher and believe in their extraordinary talent. Continue to challenge them. Place them on paths so that they can pursue leadership roles and see the bright possibilities ahead.

Change is not inevitable but will occur only with tireless efforts and persistent dedication. Be committed. Be fearless. Be a role model. Be a force for change. Most of all, don't be afraid. If together we all work on eliminating implicit bias and then develop a strategy to become gender blind in hiring, developing, mentoring, evaluating, and promoting women, then we can all move forward together and together we can make a difference.

When that happens, the benefit will not be just for women but for everyone. Law firms, academia, government, corporations and the judiciary will improve for all when gender bias is eradicated. Women will advance in greater numbers. Study after study shows that organizations that include women in decision making roles are more successful than organizations where there are no diverse members in the decision making process. Including more women at higher levels of management will add a new perspective. The profession will improve as women rise to new leadership positions in corporations, government, the judiciary, academia and private practice.

So, I challenge each of you to work hard to overcome the bias. Just as I removed a deep, intense fear that was at the core of my being, each person in this room can take steps to recognize and eradicate gender bias. Continue to make every effort to step forward for change. Don't be pressed into silence. Be persistent and never give up. Together we can eliminate unconscious bias and effect change, making our profession a better place for everyone.

