

KELLY DERMODY WINS MARGARET BRENT AWARD

Kerstin Firmin

The American Bar Association's highest award for women in the profession—the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award—this year goes to a San Francisco attorney who has long been blazing a trail for women both in and out of the courtroom.

Kelly M. Dermody, Lief Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein, will accept the 2019 award in August during the ABA's annual meeting in San Francisco. The former president of the Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) joins a group that includes twenty women from the Bay Area who have won the award since its inception. With Dermody, recipients include four past BASF presidents and two former executive directors.



Photo by Jim Block

“Here at BASE, we are incredibly honored and proud to have been part of the professional trajectories of these trailblazers,” says Executive Director Yolanda Jackson. “I have known Kelly since 2008 and have seen her consistently and with passion mentor and create opportunities for young women throughout our Bay Area legal community. She is intentional and unapologetic about her work to improve our profession.”

Established by the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession in 1991, the Margaret Brent award recognizes and celebrates the accomplishments of women lawyers who have excelled in their field and have paved the way to success for other women lawyers.

To win the award, an attorney must show a history of:

- Influencing other women to pursue legal careers
- Opening doors for women lawyers that historically were closed to them

- Advancing opportunities for women within a practice area or segment of the profession

Dermody, managing partner of Lief Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein’s (LCBH) San Francisco office and chair of the firm’s Employment Law practice group, specializes in class and collective actions on behalf of plaintiffs in employment and consumer cases.

She is passionate about representing people who do not have a voice against major corporations, particularly women working in the tech sector. Dermody supervises many of the most significant and challenging employment class action lawsuits in the U.S. today, including complaints brought by female and minority professionals alleging gender and race discrimination by top Wall Street and Silicon Valley firms, wage suppression claims against technology companies, overtime pay lawsuits against nationally prominent corporations, and ERISA claims that she has tried on behalf of employees and retirees for pension plan abuses.

In 2016, *The Recorder* honored Dermody with its “Giant Slayer” award for her work on *In re: High-Tech Employee Antitrust Litigation*. Dermody and her team took on Google, Apple, Intel, and other tech giants in a class action for allegedly conspiring to suppress the mobility and compensation of their technical employees.

“Women in professional jobs are now getting fed up with seeing the same problems get regurgitated generation after generation,” Dermody explains, “I’ve had a lot of class actions involving financial services and technology by women working in male-dominated industries where there have been prominent women who broke the glass ceiling 25 years ago and nothing changed.”¹

In addition to her work on gender discrimination lawsuits, Dermody is a trailblazer for women lawyers, and she shares advice from her own experience generously. “Women of my generation came into law practice with the expectation of being treated fairly,” she remembers; however, “there was an assumption of weakness or incompetence that I and other women had to constantly challenge.”²

To truly advance, Dermody realized, the legal profession needs a critical mass of women in leadership positions. In her own professional life, she combated bias through participating in bar and community activities, something she strongly encourages other female attorneys to do.

Dermody is a leader in organizations devoted to serving the public interest, improving access to justice, and ensuring that the rights of historically disenfranchised persons are protected.

She served on the Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) board of directors for seven years and served as president in 2012. During those years and beyond, Dermody has been an instrumental leader in numerous causes extremely important to women and minority attorneys, including:

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues Report: In 2007, working as co-chair of BASF’s Equality Subcommittee,

Dermody single-handedly wrote a comprehensive report for employers nationwide spelling out best practices to ensure that doors are open to LGBT lawyers and that promotion and retention goals are also embraced. This report drew national attention and was reprinted several times.

Unmasking Diversity Summit: In 2011 Dermody was instrumental in recruiting leaders and designing the framework for the “Unmasking Diversity Summit.” The “Unmasking” study looked at concerns about diversity and intersectionality, focusing on attorneys of color, women, and the LGBT community.

Breaking the Barriers Conference: Dermody spearheaded the No Glass Ceiling Committee’s “Breaking the Barriers” conference, with a goal to support law firm and corporate law departments in increasing the pipeline of women attorneys ready for key leadership positions. Kelly’s focus was the “Tools for Success” panel which targeted female associates in their first through fourth years, recent law school graduates and third-year law students.

Within LCHB, as the partner in charge of recruiting, she always ensured the firm was hiring a diverse group of summer associates, including women, women of color and LGBT women.

Dermody makes herself available to the legal community as a leader and a tireless advocate. Driven and gifted with the ability to inspire others into action, she has mobilized thousands of legal professionals, community and nonprofit leaders to come together in times of need.

A recent example was her coordination of the 2017 Good Ally Conference in San Francisco. Dermody worked with BASF and JDC to organize “How to be a Good Ally: A Strategic Engagement Conference,” which brought together lawyers, legal professionals, community leaders, and nonprofits in response to anticipated changes under the Trump administration, all within just a few weeks’ time. Dermody was able to bring in speakers and experts from all over the country. The event drew over 1,300 attendees and

featured 37 speakers, 40 participating organizations, and 13 panel discussions on topics ranging from immigration to reproductive and civil rights.

In 2012, Dermody mobilized the legal community to stand up for court funding. She helped broker an emergency compromise between San Francisco Superior Court and the California Judicial Council to keep courtrooms open and access to justice flowing during California's court funding crisis.

Dermody is hailed by all who know her and have worked with her as a trailblazer for social justice, a dedicated leader, and a role model and icon for women attorneys.

And now, this trailblazer joins the ranks of the Margaret Brent Award winners.

Kerstin Firmin is the Director of Communication and Public Relations at the Bar Association of San Francisco. Her team supports the efforts of the bar association and the Justice & Diversity Center.

Notes:

1. *Professional Services Firms Increasingly a Target of Pay Equity Suits*, by Amanda Bronstad, Law.com, October 24, 2016
2. *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, by Leslie Gordon, San Francisco Attorney magazine, Spring 2010

Bay Area Winners

Established in 1991, the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award has been won over the years by numerous Bay Area women, including:

Barbara Allen Babcock (1999)

Michelle Banks (2019)

Teveia Barnes (2004)

The Honorable Marsha Berzon (2007)

The Honorable Angela Bradstreet (2007)

Elizabeth Cabraser (2010)

Mary Cranston (2005)

The Honorable Nancy Davis (1994)

Kelly M. Dermody (2019)

Joanne Garvey (2003)

Patricia Kruse Gillette (2018)

Irma Herrera (2001)

Herma Hill Kay (1992)

The Honorable Joyce Kennard (1993)

Nancy E. O'Malley (2016)

Drucilla Stender Ramey (1997)

The Honorable Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye (2012)

Laura Stein (2010)

The Honorable Therese Stewart (2013)

Joan C. Williams (2006)

Recipients listed in **bold** are Past Presidents of the Bar Association of San Francisco. In addition, two recipients are former BASF Executive Directors: Teveia Barnes and Drucilla Ramey.