Five Facts about Stephanie Skaff

Stephanie P. Skaff

The following are excerpts from Stephanie P. Skaff’s remarks at her December 17, 2013, installation as the 2014 president of The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF).

There is a game that is going around on Facebook right now. It works like this. One of your Facebook “friends” messages you with a random number. You then post on Facebook that number of “facts” about yourself.

So today I am going to share five “facts” about myself. And hopefully when I am done, you will not only know me and the people in my life a little better, but you will see through the lens of my life some of the reasons why this bar association and its mission are so important to me.

So here goes . . .
Fact No. 1: I am a working mom.

This fact is probably not a little-known fact because I talk about my kids all the time. But what may be little known is that, after over a hundred years of amazingly diverse and talented bar association presidents, I am the first working mom to hold this office.

Fact No. 2: Martha Stewart would pity me.

I’m kind of infamous in my community for being completely without any crafting skills. I keep volunteering, I keep trying, and I keep failing miserably. I brought with me today a small craft that I made many years ago for a fundraiser being held at my daughter’s school. It’s awful.

I also brought today, however, a copy of a summary judgment brief I wrote several months ago. The court granted the summary judgment last week. Now that is beautiful.

So, Martha Stewart, I say to you: I found my craft. It’s called lawyering. I am proud to be a lawyer and to work at this craft to the best of my ability in the service of my clients.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to all of the people who taught me this craft over the years. I especially want to thank the senior partners at my firm; Terry Stewart of the [San Francisco] City Attorney’s Office (who was also a BASF president); and especially my judge, Judge D. Lowell Jensen [U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California].

In my one year clerking for Judge Jenson, I learned pretty much all of the really important things I know about being a great lawyer. At heart, being a great lawyer is not simply about the craft—it is about practicing with integrity, honor, and respect. I am proud to lead a bar association that embraces those values as part of its mission.

Fact No. 3: I own three tiaras.

I grew up in a small, rural town in central California. My family did not have a lot of money, but I desperately wanted to go away to college. So when I was in high school, I applied for every scholarship that I could find. I even entered a “scholarship” pageant—Fresno County Junior Miss. Despite the fact that I do not have any stage-worthy talent, somehow I won, and I received not only the scholarship, but also my first tiara.

But I have two other tiaras that are much more special to me. One was given to me by the women partners at Farella when I made partner ten years ago. For seventeen years, I have had the privilege and honor of calling Farella Braun + Martel my professional home. I want to thank my Farella colleagues for their support today, in particular, Frank Farella, who served as the sixty-fifth president of BASF, and Doug Young, my friend and mentor since the first day I walked in the door at Farella, who served as our eighty-eighth BASF president.

So I said I had three tiaras. My third tiara is actually a BASF tiara, given to me by the former BASF chief financial officer. This tiara is special to me because it reminds me of all the people who have worked so hard over the years to support the mission of this great bar association.
Fact No. 4: I believe in giving back.

Some of you lawyers may quibble about whether this is a “fact.” But I believe in the power of giving back to create real change.

I spent my childhood watching my parents walk the walk of giving back to underserved communities and I am so thrilled to have both of my parents here today, because they passed along to me and my brother a passion for justice, a commitment to giving back, and belief in our ability to make a difference in the lives of real people with real problems.

I am proud to be part of a bar association that dedicates itself to these same values.

Fact No. 5: BASF is the best legal organization in our country.

OK. This isn’t a fact about me at all. But I am tired of talking about me. This bar association—your bar association—is quite simply the highest-quality legal organization that exists. Anywhere.

We lead the country with our commitment to justice, diversity, and excellence in the legal profession. Over the years, we have pushed the envelope on so many fronts: in our advocacy for equality and civil rights, in our commitment to providing high-quality legal services for the poorest and most vulnerable members of our community, in our cutting-edge CLE programming for our members, and with our forward-thinking commitment to not only improving diversity in our profession now, but also creating a pipeline that will help diversify our profession in the future.

It Starts with a Day

Whatever your first experience was with our amazingly diverse BASF organization, it started with a day—one day that you decided to give your time to a section or committee, to accept that first pro bono case, to attend that first legal clinic, or to mentor that first diverse student.

One of the perks of being president of this organization is that you get to pick a special initiative or program to champion in your year as president. This year, as your 2014 president, my initiative is simple—It Starts with a Day. It makes it easy for every single one of you to give back—and not only because I believe giving back is the right thing to do but also because I believe that once you are engaged with our bar association . . . you are hooked forever. Most of you in this room are already living examples.

Our very first It Starts with a Day event will take place on January 25, when volunteers with our Legal Advice and Referral Clinic will work together at a day-long legal clinic serving low-income people in San Francisco’s Bayview–Hunters Point neighborhood. This day is perfect for those of you who may not have the time to take on a full-scope pro bono case but who want to use your legal skills when you volunteer. Join our cochairs for the day, Joan Haratani, of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, and Jay Degrooyer, from Hewlett-Packard Company, on January 25.

Our second day will take place on May 1 with our Lawyers in Schools program. In honor of Law Day 2014, volunteers will go into classrooms throughout San Francisco to teach a voting rights lesson plan. Cochair Rob Shives of Fujitsu; Ann Nguyen of Phan, Nguyen & Associates; and Monique Liburd of Google Inc., will lead our volunteers as they encourage students to reflect on the importance of a citizen’s right to vote and the challenges we still face in ensuring that all Americans have the opportunity to participate in our democracy. This day is perfect for those of you who were drawn to our profession because you believed in the law’s ability to create positive change. It’s also a great way to honor those in our history who have paved
the way for voting rights or to give back in honor of the great teachers in your lives.

The next opportunity for you to give a day will be May 17. On that day, volunteer attorneys will work side by side with adjudicated youth of the juvenile justice system at the Log Cabin Ranch, a court-ordered school located just south of San Francisco. BASF serves the court by providing panel attorneys, including panel attorneys who represent at-risk youth living at Log Cabin Ranch. This day is perfect for those of you who care about seeing at-risk kids find a new path forward. It is also perfect for those of you who find your legal brains drained after a full week of work—we will be planting gardens—no legal skill necessary. This day is being chaired by Jeff Bornstein, of K&L Gates, and Haywood Gilliam, of Covington & Burling.

Our fourth It Starts with a Day event will take place October 27. During that critical month before college applications are due, BASF volunteers will spend a day helping the diverse high school seniors in our School-To-College program complete their college applications and cross the finish line to college enrollment. For everyone in this room who went to college—that is, all of you—you know how life-changing a college degree can be. This day is perfect for you. This day is being chaired by Lee Marshall from Bryan Cave, Alexandra Vesalga from PopSugar, and Jeremiah Gordon from Google Inc.

And finally, I am so excited to announce our last It Starts with a Day event. This day is part of an entirely new program of legal services for veterans that we will be rolling out in 2014. The program—which we are calling Service 4 Service—will pull together our existing legal services programs in ways that are uniquely focused on our veterans.

In the next two years, more service members will return from deployment than in any other time in our history, and many of these returning service members will make our city their home. Many will come back with serious problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder or other serious mental illness or addiction, difficulty finding jobs or housing, or problems returning to families that have lived without them for months or even years. Because of all of these difficulties, many returning service members will find themselves faced with legal actions threatening their housing, custody rights, or benefits, and some will
even end up in our criminal justice system.

I spent a day in September at the new San Francisco Veterans Court, where veterans facing criminal charges are given the opportunity to divert into programs that address underlying issues and get them on their feet and into jobs and housing. It is an inspiring venue where real change is taking place. But it is just the beginning of what our legal community can do to help.

In the next year, our bar association will help serve these men and women who have served our country so well. In partnership with our San Francisco Veterans Court and the federal Veterans Administration, we will be sponsoring a half-day Veterans Summit in February to work on the challenging issues facing our returning service member population.

First, we will be going into a second year of the successful Mind the Gap program. In 2014, we will be rolling out a new Mentoring Circle program. Each Mentoring Circle will include not only Mind the Gap participants but also Barristers Club members and more senior attorneys at all stages of practice.

We are also going into the second year of our groundbreaking Right to Civil Counsel project. This project, which was born from the great work that Jim Brosnahan [Morrison & Foerster] and Jim Donato [Shearman & Sterling] have done and continue to do with our Justice Gap Committee, will have an even bigger agenda in 2014. In addition to continuing with the much needed legal work to support individuals and families staying in their housing, we will also be expanding to provide additional family law services that will help bring stability to the lives of low-income children. I hope you and your firms will sign up and join our efforts to make the Right to Civil Counsel a reality for the people of San Francisco.

And finally, last but definitely not least, in 2014, we will be undertaking the hard work of gathering and analyzing data in preparation for our 2015 Goals and Timetables Report. Our Equality Committee, chaired by Paul Henderson [San Francisco Mayor’s Office], Miriam Montesinos [Pelosi Law Group], Vid Prabhakaran [David Wright Tremaine], and Quyen Ta [Keker & Van Nest], has worked incredibly hard to refine our objectives and take the “first of its kind” goals and timetables project to the next level. In 2014, we will need the help of many willing volunteers to actually conduct the interviews and gather the data that will ensure the success of these efforts.

And on July 19, 2014, as part of our It Starts with a Day campaign, our volunteers will provide legal services to our veterans at a special clinic we will hold at Fort Miley. This special day will be chaired by three veterans in our own legal community: my partner, Doug Young, of Farella Braun + Martel; Alfredo Vea, Jr., of the Law Offices of Alfredo Vea, Jr.; and Cassie Rubald, of the Law Office of Cassie M. Rubald.

I am so excited about the work we will be doing with the It Starts with a Day initiative. If you have a day to give, I hope you will join us. “Just Start with a Day” and then give back as much as is meaningful to you.

There are so many amazing things happening next year at BASF, and before I end today, I want to mention just a few more of them that need your support and time.

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For now, I will just say thank you. Thank you for being here today and for all you will do in the coming year to make the It Starts with a Day initiative, our new Service 4 Service program for veterans, and all of the 2014 BASF programs a success.

Stephanie P. Skaff is chair of Farella Braun + Martel’s Intellectual Property Litigation Department and is the 2014 president of The Bar Association of San Francisco.
The Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) of The Bar Association of San Francisco kicked off its 2014 It Starts with a Day community service campaign on January 25. Hewlett-Packard Company (HP) and Morgan, Lewis & Bockius sponsored an all-day legal clinic in Bayview–Hunters Point that served fifty clients. Twenty-eight volunteers from HP and Morgan Lewis enthusiastically transformed a gymnasium into a legal clinic, conducted intakes to determine client needs, interpreted for monolingual clients, gave legal advice, and served lunch for all.