

CELEBRATING CAROLYN LEE'S "TREMENDOUS" CONTRIBUTIONS

Kathleen Guthrie Woods

Chat with The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) member Carolyn Lee, of Abkin Law, and you're likely to hear one word repeated: "Barristers is *tremendous* . . . we noticed their *tremendous* contributions . . . it was a *tremendous* gift!" Given her boundless enthusiasm, it's no surprise that *tremendous* is how many people feel about Lee's contributions to BASF.

"I could apply a long list of adjectives to her—dedicated, conscientious, calm (which always helps), hard-working, and, to top it off, incredibly nice," says Tracy Salisbury, counsel at Shartsis Friese and chair of BASF's Finance Committee, on which Lee sits. "She is one of our more prolific volunteers," says Matthew Miller, supervising attorney of the Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC—see page 45) for the Justice & Diversity Center (JDC), for which Lee does pro bono work. "She is amazingly generous and dedicated with her time and service," says Matt Gluck of Law Office of Matthew J. Gluck, who has worked with Lee since they were on the Barristers Club Board of Directors together a few years ago. They now lead BASF's Solo and Small Firm Section.

A "short" list of some of her other areas of involvement includes adjunct professor at Golden Gate University School of Law (GGU Law) in the LLM tax program, mentor to young attorneys as part of BASF's Mind the Gap program, member of Queen's Bench, member of the board of directors of the League of Women Voters, as well as active in BASF's Taxation Section and Estate Planning, Probate, and Trust Litigation Section.

"Every time she raises her hand to volunteer for leadership, Carolyn gives 200 percent," says Yolanda Jackson, executive director of BASF and JDC, then she "digs in and does it well."

A CURIOUS PATH TO LAW

Lee stayed in her hometown to earn her BA and MA degrees from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, until work opportunities lured her to bigger cities. Her career in financial services and communication marketing for a large bank opened doors for her in New York, and ultimately led her to California.

Law school wasn't initially on her radar. "I went to law school to further my marketing street cred," she says. "I was always working with lawyers, and I was so impressed

by their thought processes, their analytical thinking.” Very few people in the marketing field were lawyers, yet the ones she encountered impressed her with their ability to “work with us to solve problems.” Conveniently, GGU Law had an evening program and classrooms just about a ten-minute walk from her office so that she could pursue her studies while continuing to work full time.

As she was exposed to more and more practicing attorneys and the personal benefits of their work, she says, “I was so enchanted by what could be done as an attorney, the value we provide people,” and how satisfying it was to help the law work for others, both paying and pro bono clients. “I felt like I should be an actual practicing attorney,” Lee says, and during her last year of law school, right before taking the February bar exam, she made the decision to switch professions. She graduated with a JD; an LLM in tax soon followed, and she hasn’t looked back.

A SUPERSTAR NETWORKER, COLLEAGUE, AND FRIEND

Getting involved in BASF was a natural next step in her professional development. “I’d been out in the world,” she says, referring to her first career, “and I knew the value of being involved in organizations.” She started with the Barristers Club. “I’m shy, but I was surrounded by other shy people—a diverse bunch in ages and experiences,” she says. “Barristers is tremendous even for shy people!” She joined the Tax Section, served as vice president of the Barristers, and sat on the boards of directors for the Barristers and JDC. “And the circle expands,” she says.

“She knows everyone, everyone knows her,” says Miller. “She’s engaged, extremely generous, not just in volunteering, but also as a colleague.” As a fellow tax attorney and through various volunteer activities, Miller had known Lee prior to stepping into his position at JDC’s taxpayer clinic. When he left an earlier job, he reached out to her and asked her to coffee, to bounce ideas off of her. “Of course!” she said. “She was really excited to help me figure out the next step of my career,” Miller says. Others echo Miller’s experience of her genuine over-and-aboveness. “She’s connected, she reaches out to her net-

photos by Jim Block



Carolyn Lee, 2014 Barrister of the Year



Carolyn Lee (front row, second from left) with other solo and small firm attorneys who made a huge impact at the JDC Gala this year (pictured here with BASF and JDC Executive Director Yolanda Jackson [first row, right] and other BASF and JDC board members)

work,” says Jackson. She’s “enthusiastic, diligent, friendly, collaborative,” says Julia Campins, founding partner of Campins Benham-Baker. Campins has been working with Lee on expanding and updating BASF’s Solo/Small Firm Toolkit, and previously she worked with Lee on a subcommittee that was facing some challenges. “Carolyn stepped right in, supported others’ ideas,” Campins says.

Concurrently, Lee has invested her enthusiasm in one of her own ideas—raising the visibility of and celebrating the contributions of solo practitioners and members of small firms.

CELEBRATING SOLO PRACTITIONERS AND SMALL FIRMS

“Carolyn is an idea person,” says Jackson. “She challenges the status quo. She asks ‘Why aren’t we doing this or that?’ or ‘How can we do it better?’ Every organization needs this.”

It was in her capacity in various officer roles and on the

Finance Committee that Lee saw an opportunity to shake things up. She saw firsthand the incredible generosity of big firms, and, she says, noticed another trend: “The tremendous contributions of solo and small firms, in terms of pro bono hours, volunteering, leadership roles, as well as financial contributions.” Although solo practitioners and small firms (defined as having fewer than ten attorneys) make up 20 percent of BASF’s overall membership, when considered individually, their contributions could easily be overlooked. Grouped together, their impact was significant. “We could see that by forming and identifying them as a community,” she says, “we could raise their visibility and recognize the time, talents, and financial offerings.”

The section leaders went to work to revitalize the section and celebrate their members’ contributions. “This community existed all along, but with little formal organization,” Lee says, and shining a light on them made it easier to create programming more targeted to their unique needs. But the goal was not to isolate the section, she says. “We, all of us, belong together, part of the full Bay Area community of lawyers.” As an example, she men-

tions the pro bono work being done by BASF members. “It doesn’t matter what firm you’re from,” she says, “we’re all working together.”

LEE’S GALA GIVING IDEA

As Lee worked with the JDC board and on fundraising for its programs and projects, she identified another scenario in which she could apply what she’d learned about bringing solo/small firm members more into the fold: participation in and giving to JDC’s Annual Gala.

In previous years, their attendance and giving to the gala was low, Gluck explains, because the ticket prices and “ask” for sponsorships (starting at \$2,500) were not financially realistic for most solo practitioners and small firms. “There was a perception that [participation in the gala] wasn’t really for them,” Gluck says. That’s where Lee saw an opportunity. Fueled by her innovation and enthusiasm, last year the fundraising committee established and implemented the Opal (\$500) and Diamond (\$1,000) levels of sponsorship. Lee and team members drew upon their networks—and employed “phone calls, targeted lists, handwritten notes, a solicitation letter, social media, personal touch, thank yous”—to get the word out.

As a result of their efforts, in 2015 Opal gala sponsors have more than doubled last year’s giving and Diamond sponsors have tripled. “These gifts come not from a pool of people at a firm, but right from out of solo and small

firm practitioners’ pockets,” says Lee. “It’s a tremendous gift from these individuals!”

The impact of these gifts is significant as they support the Pro Bono Legal Services Program, the Homeless Advocacy Project, and the Diversity Educational Programs such as School-To-College, Bay Area Minority Law Student Scholarships, and Law Academy.

IN GRATITUDE

While Lee is quick to share the spotlight for the success of the Solo and Small Firm Section and the gala fundraising—she says, “It’s a team effort, it’s a community effort”—others are just as quick to praise her. “She is dedicated to the bar association and to making it the best it can be,” says Salisbury. “She’s the type of member who makes us a successful organization,” says Jackson.

Attorneys agree that Carolyn Lee is a *tremendous* asset to the legal profession.

Kathleen Guthrie Woods, a San Francisco-based freelance writer, loves when her words acknowledge and celebrate the good works of good people like Carolyn Lee.

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