

Daily Journal

COVER STORY

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Top Women Litigators

Leaps of Faith

Editor's Note

This year, we asked our honorees to consider a single turning point in their careers, a moment when success hinged on abandoning the familiar for the unknown.

Maybe it was forgoing a potentially lucrative career in another field. Perhaps it was diverging from a family practice to pursue a government job. Or it could have been assuming the lead chair in a complex trial.

As could be expected, the answers varied widely. But the message was clear. Most if not all of these remarkable women faced a point in their lives when doubt was the enemy, a moment that required unwavering faith in their abilities or judgment.

In many cases, sheer determination spawned a revelation or opportunity. It was clear: These advocates have achieved great success by confronting the unknown.

But the exercise also created a sort of blueprint, a road map for generations rising through the ranks of the legal profession.

Some of our honorees said their journeys had nothing to do with leaps — of faith or otherwise.

"The question is, 'Can I prove it?'" explained Los Angeles defense attorney Gigi Gordon. "A leap of faith is antithetical to the entire legal process, as it requires acquiring a belief without any empirical support."

Of course, many of our honorees continue to grapple with not just leaps into the unknown, but moving through all-too-familiar terrain. Studies continue to show that women still account for less than 20 percent of all law firm partners. At the same time, they are jumping off the track to partnership at far higher rates than their male counterparts.

Indeed, though we like to think otherwise, equality between the sexes remains largely a myth. After all, how do we explain the fact that women abandon the pursuit of partnership largely

Polly Towill

Los Angeles

Place of Birth: Bristol, Conn.

Law School: Georgetown University Law School

Law Firm: Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton

Practice Area: Business litigation

Years in Practice: 22

There may be a sequel to "Erin Brockovich" one day, in which the movie's namesake triumphs in a new toxic-tort class action.

But Polly Towill has ensured her client, the oil and gas company Venoco Inc., won't be playing the role of the big bad guy.

After three years of litigation, Towill and other attorneys obtained a summary judgment in a suit involving Brockovich, the much-celebrated plaintiffs' advocate.

The plaintiffs said that toxic emissions from the company's facilities near Beverly Hills High School were causing cancer and other illnesses in students and area residents.

Early last year, the court agreed with the defendants' attorneys that the plaintiffs' medical experts were unable to establish a causal link.

"Despite negative media attention, the Hollywood persona of Erin Brockovich and community pressure," said Towill, explaining the victory, "we focused on gathering the facts as quickly as possible rather than being pushed into a mammoth settlement."

Her active cases include a suit in which she is representing Great Expectations, a dating service, in a class action based on the Dating Services Act.

The partner credits much of her career success to her mother, "who recognized the budding lawyer in me in fifth grade," and her children, who "have made me more focused, more efficient and more passionate about doing the best job that I can do."

— Drew Combs



because they are too busy juggling the duties of child care. Forget Mr. Mom — Women still rule the roost.

As a result, the path to success is often fraught with gender-specific hurdles.

Today's challenges remind us that bridging the gap between the known and the unknown

requires courage and tenacity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the following pages, where many of the state's top women litigators shared those defining moment in their careers, when they leaped into the unknown purely on the belief, as so many of them told us, "that I could do it."

— Dan Schechner