

Creating a Legal Community that Mirrors Our Community

March is the third month of the year. When we were kids, it represented that we were getting that much closer to the end of the school year. Probably because where we lived in Miami, March was when we started to see the ice cream trucks and similar vendors. In our minds, ice cream meant winter was over.

As adults, we no longer need permission to eat ice cream. In fact, it is up to us to appreciate what we can have. In the U.S., there is a tendency to name days after people, items, occasion, historical events and more. March 2nd is National Banana Creme Pie Day. March 8th is both National Peanut Cluster Day and National Crabmeat Day. March 22nd is National Corndog Day and March 27th is International Whiskey Day. And there are more.

In 1987, Congress passed a law designating March as Women's History Month. This was before I graduated from law school. I think back to that time and remember meeting Judge Olga Peers in 1985 at an event. We discussed law school, and she was very encouraging. I enrolled in the evening division at the Brandeis School of Law in Louisville in 1986. I passed in the bar in February 1990.

I think back to the legal and judicial landscape in Louisville in 1990, and the phrase from a commercial, "You've come a long way, baby!" resonates.

According to demographics cited on the American Bar Association (ABA) website:

From 1950 to 1970, only 3% of all lawyers were women. The percentage has edged up gradually since then — to 8% in 1980, 20% in 1991, 27% in 2000 and 41% in 2024.

The ABA also noted that law schools award more Juris Doctor degrees to women than men every year. Also, as the population ages, more male attorneys are retiring. Women still lag behind men in compensation and partnership ranks in large firms.

In terms of the judiciary, in Jefferson County, as of today, women outnumber men on the District, Circuit and Family Court benches. On the state level, the same statistics apply.

At one point in the United States, if you asked a teenage girl what she wanted to be when she grew up, she had limited choices: teacher, nurse, secretary. The choices soon grew to include doctors, lawyers and scientists. In the last 50 years, we have seen women make breakthroughs in all professions. It is no longer considered odd to hear little girls say, "I want to be an astronaut," and have it happen. Computer science degrees and programs also show a surge of interest in girls in middle and high school. The world has changed, and in my opinion, for the better.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies are designed to promote fair treatment and the full participation of everyone—in particular, those groups that have been historically underrepresented or discriminated against based on their identity or disability. DEI policies are credited with facilitating the following:

- subtitles and captions on TVs and telephones
- family restrooms
- lactation rooms
- curb cuts in sidewalks
- reductions in workplace harassment

This list is only a few examples. It does not even include the opportunities provided to students, athletes, employees and others in their respective arenas.

Recently, DEI policies have been in the news. We have seen federal government agencies being advised to stop DEI policies and take the information off websites. Numerous colleges and universities have followed suit. Some businesses have followed the mandate, but others have stood firm and not followed it, still supporting DEI.

The LBA is a voluntary bar association comprised of its members. As such, we can continue to support DEI policies in our own organization, our firms and offices and in our daily lives.

The change in the legal landscape since the 1950s is partly due to changing populations but also to a concerted attempt by the profession to be more inclusive. I am proud to be in a profession that continues to aspire to what is right. As a profession and an organization, we should look like our constituency, our community.

How we individually support DEI is up to each of us. I joke that I am running out of stores and restaurants to visit or support as these changes occur. Personally, I will not support any organization that has eliminated its DEI policies. I hope you join me.



“

I am proud to be in a profession that continues to aspire to what is right. As a profession and an organization, we should look like our constituency, our community.

Maria
 Maria A. Fernandez
 LBA President