

Women lawyers on leadership: Take risks and trust yourself

By Barbara L. Jones

barbara.jones@minnlawyer.com

Mindful of the struggles of women in law and business but wanting to pave a way forward for future professional women, leaders in both groups recently gathered for a "Visions of Women's Leadership" roundtable at the University of St. Thomas.

Professor Nekima Levy-Pounds of the University of St. Thomas School of Law last month welcomed a group of law and business students to the discussion by remarking "Speaking of Leadership, 2008 is an exciting time to be a woman, particularly in leadership. For the first time in our history, a woman had a strong chance of becoming president of the United States. ... Additionally, [soon] history will be made yet again, as there will either be a woman of color in the White House serving as the first lady of our country or a white woman will be serving as vice president of the United States. Regardless of where we fall politically, this is a ground-breaking time in our nation's history and let me just say that it's about time!"

Next on the agenda was a keynote address by Minnesota first lady Mary Pawlenty, who discussed the development of her career as a lawyer and judge in the 1st Judicial District. She

stressed the responsibility of being true to one's self.

"No matter how much you think you have to overcome obstacles — and you will; no matter what kind of barriers are put in your way, you say to yourself, 'I will get through this but I will do it by being a decent human being.' You will be happier with yourself and those who are around you will see you in that light as well," she advised.

Pawlenty, who was appointed to the bench when she was 33 years old, said she may have been too young. But Pawlenty said she "dug down within herself" to do the job. She offered two pieces of advice based on her experience as a judge: know yourself and your own passions and trust your instincts.

"If being a trial lawyer is not in your gift mix, you don't do yourself or your client any favors by forcing yourself into that position," she advised. At the same time, it is necessary to allow time and obtain training to develop skills in something you enjoy doing, Pawlenty added.

A person who has been through legal training likely has an ordered mind, she said. "[Logic] is already there. What sometimes is not there is trusting your own intuition. Your instincts are not random. There are so many judgment calls that you need to make



U.S. District Court Judge Diana Murphy, Mary Cullen Yeager, Sonia Miller-Van Oort and Professor Julie Oseid participate in a panel on women's leadership in the law at the University of St. Thomas.

and trusting your sense of your gut feel has value. ... Always return to the core of who you are as a human being."

The roundtable also featured a panel discussion on women's leadership in law with 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Diana Murphy, Minneapolis attorneys Mary Cullen Yeager and Sonia Miller-Van Oort and Professor Julie Oseid of the UST School of Law.

Sometimes there is a difference between being a leader and being a woman leader, Cullen Yeager said. "Sometimes it's a matter of rabble-rousing and organizing women to try and make some changes. Other times it's using your voice to convince the

power base in your law firm to make changes. ...

You have to be patient and plan and talk and get allies and have this much of a conversation and a couple of weeks later this much more and bring people along."

A 2003 American Bar Association report demonstrated that women comprise approximately half of the law students but only about 16 percent of the partners at major law firms.

"As I get older I get less and less patient with this issue," Cullen Yeager said. "At about five years, women look around and they don't see a path for success. I've watched a lot of women

Leadership | From Page 9

leave my firm (Faegre & Benson) over the years and I would say 85 percent of the women who have left my firm have gone on to work at other firms. I think there are institutional barriers to the success of women at the highest levels. ... We need to move this faster."

Women can't sit back and wait to be treated well, Cullen Yeager said. "Practicing law and developing clients and moving up the ranks in a law firm is not a meritocracy. It just isn't. It's about building relation-

ships, positioning yourself and understanding how to make people mentor you," she said.

Young lawyers and women lawyers have a lot of power because the law firms need them, she continued. "With women entering in such numbers, there is a real power base if you can keep those women there. I don't think we recognize how important the young lawyers are to the success of a firm," she said.

There are many ways women can demonstrate value to their firms, said Miller-Van Oort. "You might be an associate but think of yourself as a manager. Speak up and use your

voice, go to management and say 'I think we should try this.' You may be rejected. I've been rejected many times. The point is that you are showing an interest, that you consider yourself an owner of the firm."

Women also need to remember that private practice is a business that is trying to make money, Miller-Van Oort continued. "You have power when you are able to develop clients and bring in business. If you have that, your voice is a little louder. You need to work on those things that give you value and give you the encouragement to keep moving forward."

The panel next discussed how to develop leadership qualities. One important skill is learning to garner consensus, said Miller-Van Oort. "It's important that you demonstrate that you can do that — that you can bring people together from different perspectives," she explained.

An important leadership trait is to be willing to put yourself forward and to take risks, Murphy said. She recalled that when she applied for the U.S. District Court, she received support from unexpected places. "But you have to be willing to put yourself on the line," she said. 