

Celebrating 50 Years and New Beginnings



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One of the best events that the State Bar presents is our "Golden Celebration." This has very little to do with the event itself and everything to do with who it celebrates—our members who have reached the 50-year mark in the profession. Having attended a number of these celebrations, I can tell you that these 50-year attorneys have some remarkable stories to tell and wisdom to share.

Many have retired from the active practice of law, but some are still practicing, and others serve primarily as mentors for younger attorneys. The State Bar compiles a booklet with the honorees' thoughts on certain topics, and what they consider to be their biggest accomplishments. I've really enjoyed reading the accomplishments and reflections of our senior members and thought I would share at least some of them with you. As I have the pleasure of practicing with one of those honorees, I'm taking this opportunity to interview her and share her thoughts with you.

I practice law with my sister, Dana M. Warnez, and my mother, Florence Schoenherr-Warnez. My mom has been practicing law since 1957, in the same office in Center Line, which is in southern Macomb County. She began working as a legal secretary upon her graduation from St. Clement High School in 1948 and attended college and law school at the University of Detroit as an evening student while working full time. She graduated from law school in 1956 and was admitted to the Bar in January 1957. She began practice with her law partner, Guy L. Frost, who had previously employed her as his legal secretary, and they worked together until his death in 1967. She was a solo until I graduated from law school and joined her in 1985. My sister joined the practice in 1996.

KMC: What's been the biggest change since you started practicing?

FSW: Technology—you need a computer of some type to do everything, and if you can't or don't use one, you feel backward. There's a much bigger premium on speed of work today. I don't know if that's always good.

KMC: So what's stayed mostly the same in the past 50 years?

FSW: You still need to work hard to get anywhere, but there is a lot more competition now, and practicing is more like a business.

KMC: What do you mean by "more like a business"?

FSW: Well, I think you worry more about money and finances now. There is so much competition with the increased number of attorneys. When I started, I think there were about 100 lawyers in Macomb County. How many are there now—about 1,500, right?

I also think there is much more specialization. When I started, everyone was in general practice; you had to do a little bit of everything, but that's not the case now.

KMC: Do you think that's a good or a bad thing?

FSW: Well, it's good as long as you can find an area you like to work in. I like to do real estate and probate and estate planning, so it's worked out well for me. But you have to find an area you like that also has enough business to make a living.

KMC: What was it like to be one of the first women attorneys in the county?

FSW: You know that I don't really judge people on gender or things like that. If you can get the job done, you're okay with me. I guess that it was very socially isolating. I went to a couple of bar meetings, but there were just two or three of us women. I never felt that it affected my work. It didn't matter

at the office, because the clients knew me, and they liked me, for the most part. Since I'd been working there for nine years before I became an attorney, they knew I worked hard and could get the job done. I can only think of a couple of clients who didn't want me to do their work after Guy died. I made a go of it. I never did a lot of trial work, though.

KMC: What's your advice for new attorneys?

FSW: Work hard, be honest, and prepare, because if you don't, it'll catch up with you. Don't underestimate the difficulty of beginning and maintaining a law practice—you have to stick with it for the long haul.

I hope that each of you will take a look at the list of our 50-year honorees (which was published in the March 2007 *Michigan Bar Journal* and is available online at <http://www.michbar.org/journal/pdf/pdf4article1132.pdf>), and seek out those you know, not only to congratulate them, but also to ask about their lives and experiences in the law. I think you'll learn a lot from them and can incorporate their experiences into your own practice.

May brings many new beginnings. As I write this at the beginning of April 2007, the State Bar has just hired a new executive director. Janet K. Welch has served as our general counsel since 2000, so many of you may know her or be familiar with her work on legislative projects, court rules, or the public policy newsletter. The Board of Commissioners is very excited to welcome Janet to her new role and looks forward to working with her for many years to come. Janet's unique background as a legislative analyst in the Michigan House and Senate, and as general counsel to the Michigan Supreme Court, makes her ideally suited to move the State Bar forward in the new millennium. ■