

# New SBM president wants members to engage, unite

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She almost didn't make it. Yet here she is.

That's the story of new State Bar of Michigan President Dana Warnez's life — and birth.

"She was born three months premature, weighing only 2 pounds, 9 ounces, with only a 20% chance of survival without severe health issues," said Florence Schoenherr Warnez, Dana's mother and first legal mentor. "However, after much love, will, support, and prayer, she overcame all the odds.

"She is our family miracle."

Dana Warnez has always been a fighter, a fierce competitor, and a force to be reckoned with. But she balances these traits with a strong sense of fairness, careful contemplation, and authentic kindness — traits her friends, family, and colleagues say will serve her well as the 87th president of the State Bar and its first openly gay leader.

Meri Dembrow, Warnez's partner, said she hopes Dana's "style will encourage others to be, if not outwardly kind, then at least considerate and collegial with each other. If one emulates Dana, then they will not only say the right thing, but they will say it in the right way."

Hon. Kathy Galen, Warnez's friend and golf partner, agreed.

"Dana's reflective, kind, and caring personality will translate well to her role as SBM president," said Galen, a 38th District Court judge for the city of Eastpointe. "She will lead based on sound professional and business judgment and will strive to do what is best for the State Bar and

all of its members both now [and in the future.]" In that spirit, Warnez said we, as lawyers, are better together than divided, and she hopes that by this time next year we will see greater engagement and unity.

"I generally like to be part of a team," she said. "I want people to come together rather than be combative with one another. Even with our differences, we all have so much more in common than what might otherwise appear on the surface."

## WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS...

Premature birth isn't the only adversity Warnez has fought to overcome.

In 2008, former State Bar President Kim Cahill lost a brief, but valiant, battle with cancer. Cahill was more than just a great mentor to Warnez; she was her older sister.

"Finding a way through that loss without letting it demolish my spirit [and] optimism, or our business, continues to be something I work through each day, each holiday, each special occasion," she said.

After her sister's passing, and as her mother began to step back from her role at Schoenherr Cahill & Warnez, the family's law practice in Center Line, Warnez took on more responsibility, concentrating on core areas such as farm sales, commercial property management and leasing, estate planning, and probate and trust administration.

Trying times, to be sure, but ones with moments of personal grace and growth.

"There were times when Kim's former clients and I literally had to stop and cry together over the loss, but we eventually took out the tissue, dried our eyes, and moved forward," she recalled.

"Those who connected and stayed were extremely special."

Through that adversity, Warnez realized she needed to "listen more, give more, be more patient, and definitely be more and more efficient. "I became a much better lawyer and person because of this challenge."

Her sister and her legacy as the State Bar's 72nd president forged in Warnez a deep sense of gratitude and a strong desire to give back. She spent a great deal of time and energy rising through the ranks of the Macomb County Bar Association, where she made lifelong friends and was involved in many memorable events, including the statewide Brown v. Board of Education 50th anniversary project.

She vividly recalls the time she was able to spend with Judge Walter Cynar at that event before he passed in 2007. "He spoke of what it was like being in the South as an officer in the military and how he felt shame when persons of color would walk into the street off the sidewalk to let him pass without impediment," Warnez said.

The moment, she said, "had an immense impression on me."

## CONTAGIOUS KINDNESS

According to those who know her best, Warnez is also a fierce competitor outside the office and the board room.

A woman with shoulder-length brown hair is sitting on a stone ledge outdoors. She is wearing a maroon velvet jacket over a white blouse with a pink floral pattern, a pearl necklace, and white pants. She is smiling and looking slightly to the right. The background is a blurred garden with green foliage and purple flowers. A white rectangular box with a thin blue border is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing the text "BETTER TOGETHER" in a large, black, serif font.

**BETTER  
TOGETHER**

"She is very active and enjoys sports and is very good at golf," Galen said. "She is a seasoned golfer, but is not afraid to play with her 'diva friends' in the Macomb County Bar outings. Self-dubbed 'Defense Divas,' Dana, Lori Smith, Sherriee Detzler, and I try to get together annually for a few golf outings."

However, "as competitive as Dana can be, she praises each and every stroke we take, no matter how slight the contribution to the team score," Galen added.

And that's Dana, they said, always making sure people know they are respected and appreciated.

In that regard, Warnez wants her visibility as a proud member of the LGBTQ community and leader of the State Bar to be a beacon to others who might not feel they have a part to play.

"It shouldn't be a big deal to say this, but it is important to be visible if for no other reason than to encourage broader inclusiveness in leadership and in the profession," she said. "I don't want some other person who feels differently to think she can't be a leader and make a difference. Meri and I have been together for 21 years, through ups and downs, cats and a dog, health challenges, losses and victories, and we share in the experiences all longstanding couples do, much better for it together than not. I am grateful for all that Meri does to balance out my life in positive ways."

Dembrow said she believes Warnez's desire to create more opportunity and greater unity will resonate with all Bar members.

"As Dana works with committees and groups

within the legal community in Michigan, she will always encourage all opinions and as much input from as diverse a group as possible," she said. "All voices will be heard, and this will lead to the best outcomes and decisions for the Bar in general."

Annette Gattari-Ross, Warnez's friend and 37th District Court administrator and magistrate, agreed.

"Dana is a great listener," she said. "She has a natural and genuine ability that makes those speaking to her feel like they are the focus of the conversation, especially in her leadership roles."

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**State Bar of Michigan President  
Dana M. Warnez**

Warnez's other sister, Pam Cahill, said Dana will "most enjoy the opportunity with the State Bar to listen and learn" from everyone.

"Being open and respectful of diverse per-

spectives is not about agreeing," Cahill said, "but more about being curious with a kind approach."

This kindness, Dembrow said, is contagious.

"Dana is the kindest person I know, and that kindness is extended to everyone from close friends to clients to a stranger or a clerk at a store."

## UNITED WE STAND

Warnez said her first order of business as State Bar president is ensuring the continuation of the great work accomplished by her predecessors.

"Not just my sister, but so many people who have shown extreme dedication to the Bar," she said. "Each and every president before me has been able to shine a light upon something we needed to move us forward."

Warnez hopes to shine her light on the continued health of the legal profession and the public in these trying times, as well as the health of lawyers as a whole.

"The legal profession needs to assess what to do next," she said. "What innovations are valuable, and where to draw lines to ensure clients' needs are met and the interests of justice are best served. By the end of the year, I believe we will have clearer path identified about how future litigation will take place.

"We have to make it a priority to assess our well-being and take steps to help and support each other," she added. "I am excited about a new SBM program, SOLACE, established in the past bar year. This program is a referral network for those willing to field requests for help from other lawyers and legal personnel. As of today,



**FROM LEFT: 1** Warnez and her sister, former State Bar of Michigan president Kim Cahill. **2** Warnez and her partner, Meri Dembrow, at the Inn at Stonecliffe on Mackinac Island. **3** Warnez with her mother, Florence Schoenherr Warnez; aunt, Lorraine Van Overbeke; and sister, Pam Cahill prior to Dana's swearing in as Macomb County Bar Association president.



**ABOVE:** Warnez (middle) is flanked by her mother, Florence Schoenherr Warnez, and sister, Kim Cahill, while being sworn in as a Michigan attorney.

there are 13,000 members of the State Bar opting in to help and at the end of the year, I am hoping for this number to steadily increase.”

Warnez said she intends to shine the light and meet these goals by engaging with members in a way that makes them feel more connected to the State Bar.

“There are so many resources available to help members, but frequently members don’t know what they are or where to start,” she noted. “I hope to shed light on programs and services that are available to help and advance the State Bar’s goal for lawyers to improve their proficiency as the practice of law changes. To be practice-ready and effective lawyers, all of us need to fine tune skills and help each other, so that as innovation gets implemented, the profession continues to serve the interests of the public.”

Warnez said she will lead by example.

“I will strive to be mindful in setting an example of collegiality and professionalism and hope to encourage lawyers to set an example for everyone — our family and neighbors, in business, at church, in our local recreational league

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## MEET DANA WARNEZ

**Education:** University of Michigan (1993); University of Detroit Mercy School of Law (1996).

**Firm:** Schoenherr Cahill & Warnez in Center Line.

**Practice areas:** Estate planning, probate and trust administration, transactional real estate.

**Bar association and related service:** State Bar of Michigan (president); SBM Representative Assembly (past chair); Michigan State Bar Foundation (fellow); Macomb County Bar Association (past president); Macomb County Bar Foundation (past president); Macomb Probate Bar Association (member); Women Lawyers Association of Michigan (member).

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of choice, wherever you are — to lead people to resolve problems without fracture and show others how to discuss and debate a hard issue and walk away from that able to find new perspectives or at least respect for someone who may not agree with you,” she said.

Dembrow said lawyers should simply reach out to Warnez and see for themselves.

“Dana will gladly return their call and after the call, each lawyer will feel that they were heard

and that they’ve formed a friendship with her,” she said.

Warnez confirmed this sentiment, noting she will listen to anyone who has questions or concerns about the bar and imploring members to engage with her.

“Don’t sit on the sidelines and complain,” she said. “Be part of the conversation and the solutions necessary to keep this profession as noble and admirable as it ever has been.”