

Dana M. Warnez, 2012–2013 Chair of the Representative Assembly

By Anne MacIntyre-Freedland

As a member of the Macomb County Bar Association (MCBA) Board of Directors, I am proud to announce that on September 20, 2012, current MCBA President Dana M. Warnez was sworn in by Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Michael J. Riordan as chair of the State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly for 2012–2013.

Vince Lombardi once said, “Great leaders aren’t born, they’re made.” If this is true, then to know how someone became the person they are, you must know something about their family, their childhood, the adversity they’ve faced, and their triumphs. This certainly holds true for Dana Warnez.

Dana’s mother, Florence Schoenherr-Warnez, is a 55-year member of the State Bar of Michigan. She grew up on her parents’ 30-acre farm in Warren and graduated from St. Clements High School in Center Line. In an effort to get “out of the fields,” the resourceful Florence took a secretarial position working for an attorney, Guy Frost, from 1947 to 1957. Guy was so impressed with Florence’s skills that he encouraged her to get a law degree, which she did at the University of Detroit Law School. In 1957—the same year she became a member of the State Bar—Florence married Maurice Cahill; the couple had two daughters, Kim and Pam. Florence began practicing law with Guy Frost. Just as she had reached her stride as a mother, lawyer, and trailblazer for women, tragedy struck. Maurice succumbed to cancer in 1968, and Guy died just a few months later.

Yet Florence persevered, continued practicing law, and eventually met Dana’s father, Donald Warnez. Born to first-generation Belgian immigrants, Donald grew up on Detroit’s east side and graduated from De La Salle High School. After graduation, Donald worked with his father in the family’s



Dana M. Warnez (right) and her mother Florence Schoenherr-Warnez enjoying a dinner party together in 2007.

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residential construction business before enlisting in the army during the Korean War. Following his years of service, he worked as a technician with Michigan Consolidated Gas Company until his retirement.

With a law practice, two girls to raise, and a new marriage, it’s doubtful that Florence was seeking to have more children.

But along came Dana—not without her share of theatrics. Florence’s due date was in November, but Dana was born prematurely on August 8, 1971, weighing just one pound, 15 ounces. To paraphrase Lori Finazzo, a Macomb County attorney who so eloquently introduced Dana as president in the MCBA’s *Bar Briefs*, from a tiny acorn, a great oak was born! After nearly two months in the

hospital, Dana was finally healthy enough to go home, weighing in at a little more than five pounds. True to her fighting spirit, Dana had no complications in her health and development as she grew.

As the baby of the family and a “medical miracle,” Dana was always the center of attention. Between the many Schoenherr cousins, aunts, and grandparents living nearby in Warren—not to mention her two older sisters—she had an abundance of adults around her, helping her learn and grow. Dana enrolled in University Liggett School in sixth grade and flourished, enjoying a curriculum and culture that fostered an appreciation of diversity, the outdoors, and academic achievement. During her years at Liggett, Dana traveled out west to study geology and played field hockey, ice hockey, and lacrosse. Never one to rest, she also asserted her independence at a young age by attending the Culver Military Academy’s summer school, eventually graduating with the rank of staff chief naval officer.

Heeding the call of independence, education, and travel, Dana began her college experience at Bates College, a small liberal arts school in Maine. But her wanderlust turned to a yearning for her home state of Michigan and the proximity of family and role models who were shaping her into the outstanding young adult she was on her way to becoming. Dana transferred to the University of Michigan and earned a degree in English in 1993. She then followed in the footsteps of her big sister Kim and mother Florence and pursued law school, graduating from the University of Detroit–Mercy Law School in 1996.

Keeping it “all in the family,” Dana joined her mother and sister in law practice. She set about learning all the general practice areas her family knew—estate planning, real estate, and domestic law among them. She



Dana (center) flanked by her mother (left) and sister Kimberly M. Cahill as she is sworn in to practice law in the state of Michigan in November 1996. (Hon. Peter J. Maceroni presiding, not present in photo.)

Dana followed in the footsteps of her big sister Kim and mother Florence and pursued the practice of law.

willingly accepted court-appointed assignments in both probate and district courts, finding the interaction with challenging clients and their respective situations stimulating and instructive. Never one to waste an opportunity, she eagerly soaked up every bit of Kim's and Florence's experience and knowledge along the way, knowing there was no better education than learning from those who have gone before her.

One would expect it would be difficult to emerge from the long shadows cast by such a professionally accomplished mother and successful sister, but not for Dana, who is widely admired in Macomb County and elsewhere for balancing a sincere acknowledgement of the influence of her predecessors with the grace of commitment to her own distinct style. She knows exactly who she is and expresses it in everything

she does. Dana joined the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan and the Macomb County Bar Association and made her mark through active participation in Law Day as chair of the MCBA's Young Lawyers Section. As YLS chair, she received the MCBA Special Service Award for spearheading the sponsorship of a team of students competing in the Michigan Youth in Government mock-trial competitions. She has served as a director for the Macomb County Bar Foundation since its inception and currently chairs its Scholarship Committee. Dana also has served as a hearing panelist on the Attorney Discipline Board and a member of the SBM Character and Fitness Committee.

As Dana thrived professionally, her personal life flourished as well. She officiated high school lacrosse games in her spare time and purchased her treasured home in



Dana and Meri Dembrow on the porch of the Grand Hotel, Mackinac Island, in June 2011.

Royal Oak, which she now shares with her partner, Meri Dembrow, their dog, Tori, and new kitten, Dusty. Meri and Dana have traveled far and wide, enjoying fine cuisine at local and not-so-local haunts. And, like big sister Kim, Dana is a voracious reader.

As often happens at the high point of a movie, life dealt Dana an unexpected blow when her father passed away in 2002 and her widely respected sister, Kim, died of cancer in 2008, leaving a hole in the heart of the statewide legal community.

Almost overnight, Dana became managing partner of the family's law practice, feeling the weight of upholding and continuing her sister's journey of service while making her own mark on the profession she so earnestly loves. She dove in eagerly, discovering that her intensified commitment to the bar provided both the outlet she needed through serving others and the solace she required in the midst of her grief.

With the support and approval of the MCBA and Macomb County Bar Foundation, she initiated the creation of a memorial fund in Kim's honor, the purpose of which is twofold: the fund is dedicated to promoting lifelong civic learning by providing law school scholarships to deserving students and has also established a reading program for local high schools in which lawyers and students read a law-themed book together, culminating in an essay competition for awards and scholarships. As much as the students love the reading program, Dana is

typically the “biggest kid” of them all—her eyes light up in anticipation of another great literary adventure on the horizon whenever the year’s reading assignment is discussed.

Dana began serving on the Representative Assembly in 2005. Without question, she learned by observing Kim’s expert navigation of RA leadership positions and is uniquely qualified to lead us as its chair in the coming year. She looks forward to determining new paths for the RA, mindful of the need to change with the times and remain relevant to the members it serves. She anticipates the RA will continue to pinpoint and identify specific recommendations relative to the improvement of its internal operation. As always, Dana’s insight, compassion, and leadership will lend themselves to discussions of appropriate procedures for safeguarding the rights of clients within the legal system as well as proper protocol

for suddenly disabled, incapacitated, or deceased attorneys.

Macomb County is thrilled to share “our Dana” with you, and we are so proud to watch her tackle yet another challenge. She

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did not make friends in our bar association as much as she endeared herself to them, one by one. To this day, it is virtually impossible to find anybody with anything

negative to say about Dana. I am confident she will serve the RA in an exemplary and tireless fashion, and I take great comfort in the fact that when her RA service is through, she will embark on an adventurous and much-deserved vacation before returning home once again to family, friends, and the practice of law in Macomb County. I know we definitely need her to come back to us, as sure as I know that somewhere Kim is watching all of this with her characteristic “Cahill smirk,” nodding in approval, saying, “Well done, little sis, well done.” ■

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