

# Kathleen M. Allen, 2013–2014 Chair of the Representative Assembly

By John Bobrowski

**T**his September, Kathleen M. Allen became the 39th chairperson of the State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly. Those of us who know her well are thrilled by her rise to chair, both for her and the bar. Kathleen's passions—lawyering and gardening—helped prepare her to serve in this position.

Kathleen's deep belief in the nobility of the law profession is rooted in a vision of a collective professional purpose—assuring fair administration of justice. As a gardener, she understands that healthy natural growth is fostered by assuring the special qualities and natural features of each plant are revealed, and she knows that in both lawyering and gardening, great results come from great effort.

A longtime supporter of the organized bar, Kathleen is a member of the Grand Rapids Bar Association and the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan, serving as the latter group's president in 2006–2007. She has represented the 17th Circuit in the Representative Assembly since 2006.

Kathleen always wanted to be a lawyer, which is not that uncommon in the profession. What makes her early career aspirations uncommon is that very little in her background explains her attraction to lawyering. Kathleen grew up in Kent-



Kathleen M. Allen

wood, Michigan at the time when it was changing from a small town to a suburb of Grand Rapids. She is the second daughter and third child of a first-generation, Sicilian-American mother whose first language was Italian and a southern Scotch/Irish-American father whose favorite childhood activities were swimming in and romping on the banks of the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee.

The slender, dark-haired girl with the olive complexion was as a dark burgundy

dahlia in a garden of calla lilies and tulips. The Allen family embodied diversity in 1960s Kentwood, which, at that time, was largely a homogenous Dutch-American community. Kathleen's family was of modest means but hardworking; her mother was one of the few women in early 1960s Kentwood to work outside the home.

Growing up, Kathleen did not know any lawyers, but she still aspired to be one. Even in her early years, fairness for everyone was one of her basic values, and she believed that lawyers helped and protected people. She learned that people were best protected when they had the ability to stand up for and protect themselves, and the world worked best when each person had a fair chance to choose his or her direction. She believed that lawyers made a difference in society by helping people make informed decisions and take the necessary actions to move in the direction of their choosing.

Kathleen is tenacious. Achieving her dream of becoming a lawyer became more difficult as the recession hit, but she worked as many as three jobs at a time to save money for college. Her hardworking mother was embarrassed when she began collecting pop and beer cans from a popular local drive-in theater and used the deposits to augment her college savings. She earned



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Left to right: Kristin Arnett, Kathleen Allen, SBM Past President Kimberly Cahill, former Supreme Court Justice Marilyn Kelly, Laura Canfield, Ann Routt, and Lee Somerville at the Women Lawyers 2007 Annual Meeting in Lansing



Photo by Jeff Dykehouse

Left to right: ARC of Kent County Executive Director Tammy Finn, Roy Nordstrom, David Nordstrom, Mike Taylor, and Kathleen Allen

enough money to attend Michigan State University—supplemented by an MSU Community College Honors Scholarship. After graduating, she earned her law degree from Valparaiso University Law School.

Good gardeners know that plants grow best with proper soil composition and the right combination of sunlight and water. With its mission of service and fairness, Legal Aid of Western Michigan provided the perfect environment for Kathleen to grow into her profession. Since 1997, she has represented and counseled Legal Aid clients,

some of whom are on the fringes of the functioning economic and social systems. Her efforts have extended far beyond legal advice and representation.

As lawyers, we take pride in the lengths we go to serve our clients, but many of our efforts may seem ordinary when compared to Kathleen's. She has helped clients with housework so they can keep their homes and, in some cases, keep their children. She has driven clients to appointments and made sure their children had necessities like car seats and diapers. Helping people and

helping her clients succeed in life, not just in court, is important to Kathleen.

Indigent clients often need more than help with their immediate problems. They need counseling to help them understand their personal stake in positive outcomes so they can avoid continually entering the legal system. At Legal Aid, success is measured not only by wins and losses, but also by the many clients who become self-supporting and successful with the organization's assistance.

In 2001, Kathleen helped develop the processes and procedures used by the Legal Assistance Center, a self-help legal program located in the Kent County Courthouse that provides information to low-income individuals so they can represent themselves in civil disputes.

Much like sunlight to plants, volunteer work is vital to Kathleen. She has been a member of the Catholic Charities West Michigan Board of Directors since 2008. From 2002 to 2008, she served on the board of the ARC of Kent County, a nonprofit program that advocates for the general welfare of children and adults with developmental disabilities. While serving as ARC president from 2005 through 2008, she promoted microenterprise initiatives, which help developmentally disabled people start businesses, allowing them to better integrate into their local communities.

Naturally, family and friends are essential to Kathleen—similar to plants needing water to thrive. She is interested in everyone she meets and has nearly encyclopedic recall of the personal-life details of most of those she encounters. Despite holding down jobs throughout college and law school, she drove to Kentwood every weekend to help her mother, Josephine, who lives alone and does not drive. Now 90, Josephine watched as her daughter was sworn in as Representative Assembly chairperson in Lansing in September.

As chairperson, Kathleen tends a different kind of garden filled with talented people. The Representative Assembly is fertile ground—a place that allows lawyers to bring ideas from their communities into the legal system to implement changes that can flower and produce results for the entire state.

Kathleen understands that her role as chairperson is not much different from her role as gardener. She believes the chair's mission is ensuring all ideas have the opportunity to be considered and, if accepted, bloom and bear fruit. Her personal qualities—reverence for the profession, tenacity, service to the community, and respect for everyone—make her ideally suited to serve as Representative Assembly chairperson. ■

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*John Bobrowski is a 1983 graduate of Wayne State University Law School. He practices employee-benefits law with Legghio & Israel, P.C., in Royal Oak. He met Kathleen Allen in 2006, when she tenaciously pursued him for quick pre-approval of her client's proposed qualified domestic relations order.*



Staff members gather at the Legal Aid of Western Michigan building in Grand Rapids.