

The Consummate

PROFESSIONAL

By Naseem Stecker

It seems that lawyers have always played a central role in the life of Janet K. Welch. Her husband of 35 years is a lawyer. Their son Andrew is a lawyer practicing in Chicago. And although daughter Mara, a junior at Yale, protests that she's already been to law school (she was born during Welch's second year of law school), no one will be surprised if she too ends up in the profession. Although Welch didn't know it until many years later, a wise lawyer played a pivotal role in her early life: it was the compassionate counsel of a lawyer that helped dissuade Janet's grieving mother from considering giving up her two daughters for adoption after their father, a highly decorated fighter pilot from the Thumb, was killed at the beginning of the Korean War. Janet was two at the time, and her sister, only two weeks old. Understandably, lawyers have a special place in Janet Welch's heart, and now more so that she's the executive director of the State Bar of Michigan.

With roots firmly planted in Michigan, Welch is the first from her family to attend college. She had not contemplated the law as a profession, but was drawn to it as a second career after spending 10 years in nonpartisan work in the state legislature. She confesses that she didn't actually know what lawyers did. "I couldn't see myself as a courtroom lawyer, and thought that everything else might just be dry paperwork. However, working in Lansing, I came across people doing many of the things I was interested in, and they were all lawyers," she observed.

This unusual career path, combining a deep passion for public policy and the law, led her to the office of State Bar executive

director. She breaks new ground as the first woman to assume a role that requires her to oversee the day-to-day operations of the over 38,000-member statewide organization, implement policies set by Bar leaders, and direct efforts of the staff.

Welch attended Albion College and the University of Michigan Law School and fondly remembers mentors Julian Rammelkamp, Wayne Sheehan, and John Hart at Albion and U of M professors Francis Allen and John Reed. She is also a graduate of the Kennedy School

of Government State and Local Senior Executive Program at Harvard University and was a Fulbright Scholar in comparative literature at the University of Zagreb in the former Yugoslavia.

In addition to her 10 years in the legislature—five as the founding director of the Senate's bill analysis section—Welch served 11 years in the Office of the Chief Justice, working for five different chief justices, and later becoming the Court's first Supreme Court counsel.

Karen Hendrick, who worked closely with Janet Welch during her Michigan Senate years, recalls, "In November 1979, as the founding director of the Senate Analy-



Welch is first woman to lead the Bar as executive director

sis Section, Janet had two months to set up an entire office: interviewing for and hiring four legislative analysts and a support staff person (all of whom were new to the legislative process) and begin producing work products. By January 1980, Janet was showing her new staff the ropes of the legislative process and, at the same time, working diligently to assist the analysts in developing written products that were factual, nonpartisan, and concise. Under Janet's leadership, the staff produced summaries for Senate committee meetings and analyses for Senate floor action, ensuring that the Senate always had an analysis of the legislation before them. Some 27 years later, the Legislative

Analysis Unit of the Senate Fiscal Agency follows this same practice in producing summaries and analyses that are used by the legislature and the private sector.”

Hendrick goes on to say that “during Janet’s tenure in the Michigan Senate, she earned the respect of legislators and legislative staff as being a professional, hard-working, yet easy-going, and always approachable leader. Janet created an office environment of staff eager to work together who took great pride in their written products and thoroughly enjoyed working alongside her.”

With her trademark humility, Welch gratefully acknowledges the invaluable lessons she has learned from those years and credits all five chief justices with whom she worked—Dorothy Comstock Riley, Michael Cavanagh, Jim Brickley, Conrad Mallett, and Elizabeth Weaver—with teaching her valuable leadership lessons. She also considers Justice Robert P. Griffin, State Court Administrator Marilyn Hall, and Lucille Taylor important role models in her career.

Welch joined the State Bar as general counsel over six years ago. When Executive Director John Berry left to take up a post with the Florida Bar, she was appointed interim executive director while a nationwide search was launched for a new leader. During this time, events conspired to pose a series of challenges to her judgment and abilities. Organizational restructuring, Supreme Court controversy, a media fuss over the confidentiality of records, and a plan to tax legal services took up much of her attention. She responded well—so well that she was the obvious choice for the job.

“A unified bar is best served by an executive director who can instill trust across the political spectrum by virtue of his or her skills, fairness, balance, integrity, knowledge, and reputation,” Welch said. “Personal agendas are simply not part of the picture in how the State Bar operates. My job is to see that the Bar achieves its strategic goals as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. In addition to being aware of best practices and trends, I want to make sure that we are making maximum use of technology to serve our members and the public. I hope that members increasingly see the State Bar as the central and indis-

pensable source of information critical to their well-being as lawyers.”

If anyone has wondered what an executive director actually does, a typical day in her life might go like this: attend meeting on possible court-rule changes to address how to handle files of disabled or deceased lawyers; meet with state senator on tax on legal services and judicial budget; answer e-mails from staff, members, the public, and other State Bar executives; review plan for new membership service and budget forecast; evaluate staff training as compared to strategic-plan goals; speak with Bar president about upcoming meeting and agenda; read proposed legislation about land use court; and draft letter to Michigan Supreme Court on Representative Assembly proposal.

The State Bar of Michigan, Welch points out, is distinguished nationally because of the focus on lawyer ethics by its longtime Executive Director Michael Franck (1970–1994) and its commitment to access to justice issues. “When someone is that distinguished for that period of time, it begins to set the culture for the whole Bar. I think Michael Franck set a hallmark for the members of this Bar, and it’s one that John Berry took very seriously—so much so that John was recognized as the winner of the American Bar Association’s Michael Franck Award. Their commitment to lawyer ethics, excellence, and ‘giving back’ is something that I also value and cherish.”

As a Bar leader, Welch is very alert to some of the challenges facing the profession. She says that traditional boundaries governing the provision of legal services are tumbling all around us. “With technology, the delivery of transactional legal services in particular is now untethered from geography, while our regulatory and disciplinary and association networks are all organized around geographic jurisdictions.” She also pointed out that with lay knowledge about the law more available to the general public through the Internet, lawyers

need to work harder than ever to educate the public about the value of their specialized training. Welch also expressed concern about some very sophisticated mass-media attacks on the legal profession and even on the value of the constitutionally guaranteed jury system itself. “Our obligation to work on improvements in the profession and the legal system where it is failing, and to defend the profession and the system from

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unfair attacks, is more important than ever,” she stressed.

Confidence in her ability to help steer the organization through fair weather or foul is very high. Bar leaders and staff greatly respect her experience and familiarity with the Michigan legal system. “Janet’s combination of experience with the Supreme Court, the Michigan legislature, and the State Bar could not be surpassed,” said Kim Cahill, SBM president. “Add to that her intelligence, wonderful contemplative demeanor, and ability to include all points of view in decision making, and you have an executive director with unlimited potential. I know the State Bar will be the place for that potential to grow,” Cahill added.

According to Michigan Governor Jennifer M. Granholm, “Beyond breaking through one more barrier for women, Janet Welch will provide outstanding leadership for the organization as evidenced by her long record of distinguished service to the state, as well as her razor-sharp legal mind.” ■

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