

Katherine Kakish, 2008–2009 Chair of the Representative Assembly

By Nancy E. Dunn

Members of the Representative Assembly of the State Bar of Michigan know the new chair, Katherine Kakish, as a lawyer stepping up to leadership. I know her as a close friend and as a “teacher”—a trainer of lecturers at our parish, Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Dearborn. She is a communicator of great talent, strength, and passion. As a trainer, she was patient, dedicated, focused on each individual, and extremely well-prepared. The RA can expect to be well served.

Three themes run through Kathy’s professional life: commitment to public service, communications excellence, and a love for the law. Kathy didn’t enter the legal profession right away. But when she did, she brought her cross-cultural life experiences, education, and career accomplishments in metropolitan Detroit and Amman, Jordan. Kathy was born in Detroit, the eldest of six children, and spent her early years in Allen Park and Lincoln Park. When she was 10 years old, the family moved to Jordan. Kathy returned to the Detroit area when she was in her 30s. Her parents and siblings also moved back, so the entire family again lives in southeastern Michigan.

Kathy’s father is Jordanian. Her mother is an American of Scottish and German descent. Kathy’s father came to Detroit from Amman as a young man, and was an engineering student at Wayne State University when her parents met. After Kathy’s parents married, her father worked at Wyandotte Chemical (now BASF). Kathy has happy childhood memories of life downriver. The move to Jordan, however, was a culture shock. Kathy did not speak Arabic, and schools were reluctant to take this fifth-grade student. But the Rosary Sisters, Arab Catholic nuns who ran highly regarded schools in Jordan, agreed to accept her as a



Hon. Michael J. Talbot, Michigan Court of Appeals, officiated the oath of office for Kathy Kakish at the Representative Assembly meeting on September 18.

student. The sisters drilled her on written and spoken Arabic until she became fluent. Kathy attended the Rosary College through high school graduation.

Kathy attended the University of Jordan and received a bachelor’s degree in English language and literature, and then spent nearly a decade as a journalist in Amman. In her seven years with the Jordan Radio and Television Corporation, she worked as a newscaster and news program host for Radio Jordan’s Foreign Service, and as news anchor and editor for the 10 p.m. English language television newscast. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) of London was the staff role model, Kathy recalled: “Everyone aspired to be as good as the BBC announcers, reporters, and editorial teams.” A respected BBC broadcaster coached Kathy and her colleagues.

Journalism kindled Kathy’s interest in public service. She interviewed Terry Waite, special envoy for the Archbishop of Canterbury, about his work on behalf of American and British hostages held in the Middle

East. “I saw his gentleness, his belief in the goodness of humanity, his compassion for people. I will never forget it.” Shortly after the interview, he departed for Syria on his way to Lebanon to secure the release of hostages. Instead, he was captured and held hostage for five years. When he was finally freed, Kathy had the honor of announcing his release on Jordan Television.

Kathy’s interest in the law also began in Jordan. As a journalist, Kathy interviewed visiting Arab Americans. Many were lawyers. One in particular inspired her—Albert Mokhiber, a Washington lawyer who served for a time as president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. “I saw that it was so important for Arab Americans to enter into the legal field and make their voices heard in the United States. I promised myself that if I ever came back to the U.S., I would try to be like him.” Shortly after Kathy returned to the Detroit area, she met Spencer Abraham, an Arab American from Michigan who was running for the U.S. Senate. She was impressed with his intellect, his compassion, and his practical approach. For Kathy, the case for becoming a lawyer was getting stronger. “These were good, decent, intelligent, caring lawyers—I wanted to be like them.”

Kathy’s first job upon her return was assisting the executive director of the Arab-American and Chaldean Council (ACC). She also worked as a freelance associate news director for the UPN-50 WKBD *10 O’Clock News* on television, and as a producer-director for Arab Network of America (ANA) Radio, WNZK 690-AM. Later, she was a field reporter for City of Dearborn Television (CDTV).

By the late 1990s, Kathy could no longer ignore the call to a legal career. She proceeded with her usual determination. She applied to Wayne State University Law School,



Kathy interviewing Her Majesty Queen Noor at the site of the first facility built in Jordan by the international SOS Children's Villages, for orphans.

took out student loans, studied furiously, clerked at Ford Motor Company's Office of the General Counsel, and lived frugally until she finished school. She received her juris doctor degree in May 2001 and was admitted to the State Bar in November 2001.

Kathy enjoys working with pure legal concepts, analysis, and research. She found that she had a flair for the critical task of getting it all down in writing. She is grateful that her first job was with the Court of Appeals: "For me, it was the best preparation for a career in the law—legal analysis and legal writing. These are invaluable skills for a lawyer."

After about two years as a Court of Appeals prehearing attorney, she was hired as law clerk to Court of Appeals Judge Michael J. Talbot. She spent a year clerking for Judge Talbot and loved it, but left when a position opened up at the Driver's License Restoration Section in the Detroit office of the Department of Attorney General. Kathy was eager for the appellate case experience in a public service role. The Court of Appeals work had prepared her well, but she lacked courtroom experience. Ron Robinson, director of the Detroit office of the Attorney General, became her mentor. "He trained me in oral arguments in circuit court. He is a wonderful and dedicated teacher." For the past year, Kathy has worked as an assistant attorney general in the Licensing and Regulation Division.

Her commitment to public service remains strong: "You can go home and be proud of what you did. You are working for the common good. You know you are help-



Kathy comes from a large family—here with nieces and nephews.

Because the RA is a large organization, it is important that channels of communication are open and clear.

ing someone, whether it is an individual person or society in general."

Kathy demonstrated that commitment in another way by applying to the Michigan Political Leadership Program at Michigan State University. She was thrilled to be accepted as a fellow; each year's program is limited to 24 participants. She completed the intensive 10-month weekend curriculum, and was a proud member of the 10-year anniversary class in March 2005.

Kathy's journey has spanned many years and several thousand miles, from public service journalism to public service law. "My personal conviction is that public service is the thread that keeps society human, keeps it together, and keeps it functioning," she said.

Kathy has been an elected member of the Representative Assembly since 2003. When she attended her first meeting, "I was in awe. There were 150 attorneys debating

proposed changes to statutes and state court rules. The combination of the theories and the experience and the wisdom they brought to that debate was unimaginable to me. There must have been a thousand years of legal experience in that room."

Not surprisingly, Kathy takes her upcoming leadership responsibilities seriously. She sees the RA as an important guiding force within the State Bar, and one that can bring honor to the profession. She brings to the task her passion for public service, her commitment to the law, and her communications skills. "Because the RA is a large organization, it is important that channels of communication are open and clear. My goal is to maintain open channels of communication between the RA and the various sections and committees of the State Bar, and between the State Bar and the affiliated associations."

Kathy asked Judge Talbot to administer her oath of office as RA chair on September 18. She felt honored and privileged that he accepted. And, as she prepares to begin her term, she still has that sense of awe. "All areas of the law and all walks of life throughout Michigan are represented within the RA. I hope my excitement and my passion for the RA will serve this legal group." ■

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