

# Plenty of Horse Sense:

## Julie I. Fershtman

Fifth woman president will focus on member needs

By Naseem Stecker



Left to right: Husband Robert Bick, daughter Katie, and Julie.

Though he supported her decision to go into the law, Sidney Fershtman did not encourage his only daughter, Julie, to pursue it. A man from the “old school” who practiced law in the Detroit area in the late 1950s until his untimely death in the mid-1980s, he did not think it was a suitable career for a woman. It was demanding, mentally and physically—tough cases, tough opposing counsel. In his own general practice, he had to put in long hours and returned home many evenings exhausted. Occasionally, there would be phone calls in the middle of the night from clients who had been forced out of their homes or were in jail.

No, it wasn't for his daughter. “Be a nurse,” he advised. But she had different ideas.

From a very young age, Julie Fershtman saw the impact that her father had on people. “They turned to him for help—a divorce, a family crisis, a bankruptcy, a child in prison. He tried hard to improve their lives and make a difference.” On one occasion, he took her to court to see him represent a client, and she was introduced to a female lawyer. “It was an odd reality at that point as I realized there were women in this profession.”

As a teenager, she was the type who was on the debate team and had the lead role in the high school play. Coincidentally, it was an Ayn Rand courtroom drama with Julie playing the role of defense attorney. Her fascination with the law led to stints in her dad's law office. During summers while in high school, she held jobs in other Detroit-area law firms, seeing firsthand what lawyers do and the difficulties they faced. Before attending law school, she held virtually every position a law office offered to those without legal or paralegal training—messenger, driver, file clerk, copy clerk, receptionist, and office assistant.



Julie graduated from Emory College in 1983 and Emory Law School in 1986 and, as a young lawyer, practiced while also showing horses on the weekends—her other great passion. She had been riding since she was a child and by age 10 was considered a talented equestrian. She spent the formative years of her life at a stable with a horse “learning self-reliance, persistence, and patience, and spending time with people from many different backgrounds.” She also worked as a horseback-riding trail guide for a public stable in then-rural Novi.

Could she combine the two interests? At the time she was pondering this, animal law, let alone equine law, was not taught in school. At a 1993 seminar, Julie asked legendary marketing expert Jay Foonberg, author of the ABA book *How to Start and Build a Law Practice*, if she could succeed at practicing equine law in Michigan.

“You’ll starve,” he replied. Today, Foonberg cites her experience as an example of marketing success in his speeches.

How did she do it? Marrying her two interests took diligence and persistence—weekends at law libraries before the prolifer-

ation of the Internet, researching everything she could find involving horse-related law. She scoured law review articles, ALR annotations, magazines, digests, cases, and more.

“I created binders and started organizing them and began discovering themes. On the liability front, for example, I found that states were enacting liability statutes that followed a general pattern. I also discovered trends involving equine-related contract disputes. Yet nobody was writing about them. There were very few articles at the time and no books. Once I learned what equine law was, part of my mission was to help educate people about the law and how to avoid disputes. I began writing articles and developed, little by little, an area of practice.”

In 1993, she discovered a publication called the *Equine Law and Business Letter* and paid for a listing that soon led to her first major client, an insurance company. Early in her career, Julie took the initiative to fly to major conventions for visibility and to develop industry contacts. Soon, she was receiving invitations to speak at those conventions. Her speaking engagements and, later, writing opportunities put her on the national



## Horsin’ Around...

- Julie grew up in Oak Park, Michigan with her brother, Bill. Her grandparents on her mom’s side were equestrians. She now lives in Franklin in a home complete with a barn and pasture but currently no horses. She is the only one in her family who loves to ride.
- Besides the law, Julie considered becoming a veterinarian or a commercial artist. An experience at age 13 with an injured horse that was bleeding badly narrowed her focus.
- She is a talented political cartoonist and did many sketches while in college.
- Julie attended Michigan State University’s James Madison College before transferring to Emory College in 1981.
- She was the chair of the State Bar Representative Assembly in 2001–2002. She serves on the ABA House of Delegates and is vice chair of a committee of the Tort, Trial and Insurance Practice Section. She was also the Young Lawyers Section chair from 1995 to 1996.
- Some of Julie’s favorite programs and services at the Bar are the *eJournal*, Practice Management Resource Center, Online Career Center, “Professionalism in Action” mentoring program, Public Policy Resource Center, and Justice Initiatives.
- Julie has a blog at [www.sbmpres2012.com](http://www.sbmpres2012.com).

She spent the formative years of her life at a stable with a horse “learning self-reliance, persistence, and patience, and spending time with people from many different backgrounds.”

## 22 Plenty of Horse Sense: Julie I. Fershtman



Women presidents of the State Bar of Michigan, left to right: Julie I. Fershtman (2011–2012), Kimberly M. Cahill (2006–2007), Hon. Victoria A. Roberts (1996–1997), Nancy J. Diehl (2004–2005), and Julia D. Darlow (1986–1987).

map. Julie has authored *Equine Law & Horse Sense* and *MORE Equine Law & Horse Sense*, contributed to four American Bar Association books and five ABA law journals, and penned more than 200 published articles. To date, she has had more than 150 speaking engagements at conventions, continuing legal education programs, and conferences in 27 states. Her client list includes some of the world's largest insurers as well as businesses and individuals nationwide. Even some celebrities in the equestrian and entertainment industries have sought her services.

Equine law varies from 25 to 75 percent of her practice. She also focuses on commercial litigation, insurance defense, and insurance coverage law. In 2007, she hired a full-time associate. Last year, after 17 years in a solo and two-lawyer practice, she be-

came a shareholder with Foster Swift Collins and Smith, PC.

Many articles have been written about Julie's innovativeness in developing her unique niche area of equine/equestrian-related law and liability. Her advice to others interested in doing what she did is to first lay the foundation by developing basic competency in the practice of law and then learn that specific area of law.

"Realistically determine whether you can make a practice in this, or any, niche area of the law because it takes a while to be known as somebody who can do the work," she said. "Use your information in a positive way to educate people. For lawyers, I call it a win-win. That is, speaking engagements are important not just to market your services but also to educate people on their rights.

"Use your information in a positive way to educate people. For lawyers, I call it a win-win. That is, speaking engagements are important not just to market your services but also to educate people on their rights."

And leaving the office to meet others helps in several ways. Not only do people want to hear what you, the lawyer, have to say but the opposite definitely holds true; listen carefully to the tremendously good and very insightful questions that are bound to come your way. A lot of the writing that I have done, even categories in my books, comes from really good questions that someone asked."

Only the fifth woman to lead the State Bar of Michigan in its 77-year history, Fershtman begins her presidential year eager to listen to what the 41,500 members are saying and thinking. At the same time, she will share with them the many ways the organization can remain relevant and make a difference in how attorneys practice law. She wants very much to be responsive to member needs.

"With the economy as difficult as it is and with so many lawyers having a tough go of it lately, lawyers are looking for ways to get their houses in order, do more with less, and get business when they don't have the money to hire consultants or purchase fancy software. One of my goals is to direct attorneys to the State Bar's Practice Management Resource Center and to make the PMRC more responsive to what the members are looking for."

Some of her recommendations to improve the service include a more interactive website; more checklists, forms and articles; podcasts; improved marketing; and how-to videos, such as a video explaining how voice recognition software works.

"I want to promote the different types of benefits offered to the practitioner so he or she doesn't have to ask, 'why do we pay our dues?'" Fershtman said. "Maybe that lawyer will come away thinking that if it only costs \$160 a year on actual Bar dues, the Bar is offering real value. Maybe a few visits to the *e-Journal* have yielded timely cases, insights, and information that has helped someone write a winning brief. Maybe the Bar's Case-maker® member benefit has saved him or her research time or cost. Maybe he or she has discovered through 'A Lawyer Helps' a meaningful pro bono activity that makes a difference in the community and draws visibility to the profession and to the lawyer. The lawyer volunteering time and wearing



## Best of Show

Julie Fershtman is a natural leader. She works hard, asks good questions, listens, and knows how to get the job done. She is well respected as a lawyer in Michigan and nationally recognized for her expertise in equine law. Julie also is a master acronym-ist. A few years back when she became a trustee of the Michigan State Bar Foundation, she was put to the test which all new trustees must face—to identify the many (45 at last count) acronyms used by our foundation staff for public service organizations with which the foundation has a connection. To this day, she holds the record! She did it in her own way—researching all of the many organizations with which the foundation might work to see which fit the acronyms. But she did it not to get the highest score (although she relishes competition). She did the research to learn about all those organizations to prepare her for her work on the foundation. Julie will be an outstanding president of our State Bar.

—Hon. Al Butzbaugh

*Berrien County Trial Court 2nd Judicial Circuit*

Julie will be a great leader for the State Bar for several reasons. She approaches everything she does with a contagious enthusiasm, which instills a positive attitude in those around her. She is diplomatic and open-minded, which puts everyone at ease to contribute in whatever way they can. Above all, Julie leads by example. This inspires everyone to work as tirelessly as she does to achieve results.

—April L. Neihsl

*Foster Swift Collins & Smith PC*

She has a good moral compass—honest, hardworking. She cares about other people and she cares about what she's doing. She uses the law to educate and help others and is involved in many legal outreach programs for the less fortunate.

—Robert S. Bick

*Williams Williams Rattner & Plunkett PC*

I have worked with Julie in various bar activities over the past 20-plus years and I share this first-hand knowledge of her leadership skills:

**L- Julie is a great Listener.** Over the years, whether at the local, state, or national level of bar activities, Julie has always taken the time to carefully listen to the issues, perspectives, opinions, and recommendations. Back in our young-lawyer phase as leaders on the State Bar Young Lawyers Section Council, she always made sure that everyone on the council had a voice and an opportunity. Her YLS leadership empowered fellow young lawyers to make a difference within our profession and for the betterment of others. On the Board of Commissioners, she is always listening for a full perspective, which enables her to pursue effective resolutions. I encourage you to share your thoughts and ideas with Julie. I guarantee she'll listen and if anyone can make a difference, she can. And by the way, she has a great ear for music as well... and karaoke. (I will forever remember our plane ride back from an ABA meeting in Boston, where fellow lawyers on the plane recognized Julie from her singing engagement at a local establishment the prior evening.)

**E- Julie is Entrepreneurial.** As a solo practitioner, Julie faced many issues, including how to incorporate her passions for horses and law. She knows firsthand the struggles lawyers face trying to create and maintain a law practice that is both successful and satisfying. She is a great role model for hard work, endurance, and creative success.

**A- Julie is Accessible.** Despite the demands of a growing practice and the priorities of her husband and daughter, Julie has always made others feel like they receive her utmost attention. She is quick to respond to voicemail and e-mail and definitely knows all about the latest and greatest when it comes to professional gadgets and tools. To some people, it's the thrill of a new toy. For Julie, it's all about efficiency and effectiveness.

**D- Julie is Dedicated.** Most people go to work to earn a living. Some people work to make a difference—in our communities, within a profession, or, more simply, for the benefit of others. This is Julie.

**E- Julie is Experienced.** She knows the system, the players, the history, and how to get things done—and this makes her very **E**ffective. Add Julie's pride in our profession along with her diligence and we have a recipe for success.

**R- Julie is Respected.** Julie is tenacious. Her persistent pursuit of excellence and success has earned her the respect of lawyers and clients throughout the country. She sets her sights high and then reaches her goals. We are so fortunate to have Julie as our State Bar president. She is, and will continue to be, a great leader.

—Elizabeth A. Jamieson



## 24 Plenty of Horse Sense: Julie I. Fershtman

the 'A Lawyer Helps' pin, hat, or apron might even be approached one day by someone asking for his or her services."

Fershtman is passionate about the Bar's leadership role in justice programs like equal access for people with disabilities and the Pro Bono Initiative. She applauds the work of the Judicial Crossroads Task Force in dealing with issues critical to our justice system. She would, however, like to see more attention paid to a profession that is in crisis because of competition from lawyers worldwide, the Internet, and the outsourcing of legal work.

"We are at a crossroads, and I'm hoping we can continue to think of ways to offer services to help our members because they are dealing with difficult times, just as the judiciary is."

Julie's commitment to the profession and to her career would not be so focused without the support and devotion of her life partner, corporate lawyer Robert S. Bick. They met in ninth-grade history class; in fact, they sat next to each other and he thought she was "cute." Julie had planned on living in Atlanta after law school and even had a job lined up, but came back to Michigan—

"kicking and screaming"—because of Robert. They've been married since 1990 and have a daughter, Kathryn ("Katie").

"Julie is a good role model for our daughter," Bick said. "She has a good moral compass—honest, hardworking. She cares about other people and she cares about what she's doing. She uses the law to educate and help others and is involved in many legal outreach programs for the less fortunate."

The family enjoys travel, music, and theater. Three years ago, Katie and Julie unexpectedly teamed up in a local production of *Oliver*.

"With no intention of acting again, I took Katie to her audition and waited with her while the director finished auditions for the adult roles," Julie said. "The director turned to the audience and said, 'We need someone to read for the part of the undertaker's wife, a grouchy and unfriendly woman. Could someone please volunteer?' Just then, Katie lifted my arm and hollered, 'She will!'"

"In any event, I came on stage and did the reading and singing as requested. Then I was given a part in the play along with Katie. But I wasn't cast for the role of the grouchy wife. Instead, and perhaps more fit-

tingly, I was cast—well, maybe typecast—for the part of a 'bar wench' who joined the chorus on stage for the local pub scenes swinging a beer mug and singing popular songs like 'It's a Fine Life.'"

Fershtman won't be swinging beer mugs, but expect to see a very energetic leader for the 2011–2012 bar year—rolling up her sleeves and pointing to opportunities, mentoring new lawyers, serving on committees, traveling the state to talk and meet with members, and offering concrete suggestions for how bar services and programs can improve the practice for the more than 70 percent of members who are solo and small-firm practitioners and others feeling the pinch of tough times.

"I hope to inspire and encourage attorneys to achieve their personal goals by dreaming big, working extremely hard, and staying steadfastly focused on becoming the lawyer they always wanted to be." ■

---

*Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at [nstecker@mail.michbar.org](mailto:nstecker@mail.michbar.org).*

"In college, I was a political cartoonist... commercial art is extremely hard to break into and I realized that it is a different type of world when you're being told what to illustrate as opposed to doing what interests you."

