

# WOMEN IN LAW

During Business First's Table of Experts discussion on Women in Law, five Buffalo attorneys discussed past strides and current initiatives to further strengthen women's roles in the law. Here is a report from the discussion that was held on December 5, 2023.



(Left to Right) Angela Zwirecki Miller, Lisa Coppola, Jody Briandi, Rosanna Berardi, and Amy Hemenway

PHOTOS BY: JOED VIERA

## Mentoring key to bringing women into law firm leadership

**W**omen make up nearly 40% of the lawyers practicing in the United States, a 5% growth over the previous decade.

However, the numbers drop off at the leadership level: Just under 27% are partners and 12% are managing partners.

Buffalo Business First Publisher John Tebeau recently hosted five women who are leaders in the Buffalo legal industry and managers in area firms to discuss how they are working toward attracting women to the profession and

giving them the opportunities to rise to administrative roles.

Joining the conversation were:

- Rosanna Berardi, managing partner, Berardi Immigration Law
- Jody Briandi, president and managing partner, Hurwitz Fine P.C.
- Lisa Coppola, founder and managing partner, The Coppola Firm,
- Amy Hemenway, partner-in-charge, Harter Secrest & Emery LLP, Buffalo office
- Angela Miller, partner, Phillips Lytle LLP

### Strength in soft skills

Miller's advice to new associates, both female and male, it's not issue-spotting, research and writing, or arguing a position. Those are well covered in law school, she said.

The biggest learning curve, she said, is knowing how to act as an attorney, to read a room, to have awareness, sensitivity and perception and to listen when dealing with partners, peers, staff, clients and adversaries.

"If you have enhanced soft skills, you are better able to adapt and come off the learning

curve a little faster than your peers," Miller said. "Women are inherently a little bit better at those soft skills. I've seen it in play. To have those soft skills and refining those soft skills can be a huge benefit."

Coppola agreed.

Having a high degree of emotional intelligence is "absolutely invaluable" for attorneys, from new associates through to the leadership, she said.

Those are the skills that take the attorney-client relationship beyond the merely transactional

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encounter and help retain clients in the highly competitive field of law, she said.

"In many ways, in a very direct and meaningful way, women can create that relationship with clients that creates a level of loyalty," Coppola said.

**NURTURING, BEING NURTURED**

Fortunate lawyers can look back at their first years in the field and be grateful for the mentors who guided them through the challenges of a new and complicated job. The panelists all profess to creating a work environment that returns

the favor to young practitioners.

Hemenway recalls being the only associate among seven partners, all men. There was a lot of work that came her way, she said, but she counts herself fortunate that the partners saw her as their future.

As a young associate, 20 years ago, she was invited to sit in on calls, assist with various issues and meet with clients, all which helped her understand what it takes to build relationships, how to spot issues and how to proceed.

"I always felt that the people I was working with were there

for me. If I was working late, they were working late. They were there the whole time. We were always working as a team, Hemenway said." "I try to take that into account when I am training my teams now. I make sure they have those opportunities to understand the context and why we're doing something the way we are doing it. I really strive to do that with the associates I am working with now. I want to be there for them."

Briandi had the same experience. Despite all the work that goes into law school, the learning just begins after

graduation, she said.

The new associate needs a mentor to help ease the way into the profession, and she was fortunate for the attorney who invested time into her development as a lawyer.

"When you start that first job right out of law school, it's kind of like being a deer in headlights, and unless someone is there helping you along the way, and giving you that guidance that you need, you are not going to know where to start, what book to open, what the proper procedure is to speak to a judge and how to speak to

## MEET OUR EXPERTS



**ROSANNA BERARDI**  
Partner



Rosanna Berardi, lawyer, mother, and entrepreneur, founded Berardi Immigration Law in 2005. Growing it from her apartment into a multimillion-dollar, full-service immigration firm, she serves an international clientele. Rosanna, a respected speaker featured in Forbes, The Los Angeles Times, Politico, and The National Post, is also an Adjunct Professor at SUNY Buffalo School of Law and CEO of High Wire Woman, aiding working women. Her community service includes initiatives like Luxury Purse Bingo, raising \$35,000 for The Kevin Guest House. Berardi Immigration Law, a woman-owned enterprise certified by New York State, reflects her success. In 2020, she was named Woman Entrepreneur of the Year by Women Owned Law (WOL).



**JODY E. BRIANDI**  
President, Managing Partner



Jody E. Briandi is President/Managing Partner of Hurwitz Fine P.C. She leads the firm's Board of Directors and chairs the firm's Premises Liability, Retail & Hospitality Liability and School District Litigation practice groups, and is a 25+ year seasoned litigator. She is an active advocate on advancing diversity, equity and inclusion, overseeing the firm's Diversity & Inclusion Committee and played a key role in establishing the Forum for Women Attorneys, a resource group designed to offer social and professional opportunities to the firm's women lawyers.

Jody frequently speaks and writes on diversity, women in the law, and law firm management best practices. For her work in advancing women's initiatives, firm leadership and litigation experience, Jody is a recipient of the Buffalo Business First Women of Influence - Corporate Executive Award, the C-Level Executive Award and is featured annually on the Power 200 Women list. She was selected to the Upstate New York Super Lawyers Top 10 Lawyers and Top 25 Women lists. Jody is also a 2023 ATHENA Leadership Award honoree and the 2023 Amherst Chamber "Woman of Distinction" Award winner.



**LISA A. COPPOLA, ESQ.**  
Founder & Managing Partner



Lisa Coppola has more than three decades of experience as a litigator and counselor at law, serving clients across New York State. She founded and is managing partner of The Coppola Firm, which helps companies and organizations enforce their rights, helps injured people recover the money they deserve, and counsels businesses, organizations, and entrepreneurs as well as charter schools business on legal issues. The Coppola Firm also offers New York-mandated annual sexual harassment prevention training through their online, easily-accessible coppolatrainings.com website.

In addition to running her law firm, Ms. Coppola chairs the board of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) which represents over 13 million women entrepreneurs across the United States. NAWBO's focus is on leadership, advocacy, and education for women business owners. She also serves on the U.S. Small Business Association's Regulatory Fairness Board.



**AMY HEMENWAY**  
Partner



Harter Secrest & Emery LLP  
ATTORNEYS AND COUNSELORS

Amy Hemenway is a Partner at Harter Secrest & Emery and was recently named as Partner-in-Charge of the Buffalo Office. As a member of the Labor and Employment Practice Group, she brings equal measures of experience and creativity as she counsels employers on a broad range of issues to assist them in complying with the various laws and regulations impacting the employer-employee relationship. She counsels national and regional employers on all aspects of employment and labor law, including contracts, wage and hour issues, discrimination and harassment matters, and conducting workplace investigations. In addition, Hemenway represents clients in individual and class action discrimination claims, collective bargaining, grievance/arbitration proceedings, and administrative proceedings and audits, including Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, United States and New York State Departments of Labor, and National Labor Relations Board proceedings.

Hemenway is recognized by Chambers USA, The Best Lawyers in America®, and Super Lawyers, and is the recipient of the 2021 Champions for Justice Immigration Award from the Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project.



**ANGELA ZWIRECKI MILLER**  
Partner



Angela is a partner at Phillips Lytle and a multi-term active member of the firm's Governing Committee. She is the leader of the Banking and Financial Services Practice Group and leader of the Bankruptcy and Creditors' Rights Team. She has more than two decades of experience representing financial institutions and a variety of corporate clients in all aspects of financial restructuring.

Angela's practice encompasses representing financial institutions and companies, particularly in the areas of bankruptcy and restructuring, creditors' rights and commercial finance. In her bankruptcy practice, she represents creditors, debtors and other interested parties in commercial bankruptcy matters and related litigation. In her creditors' rights practice, she represents creditors in enforcement and litigation of U.C.C. Article 9 remedies, and loan sales. In her transactional practice, Angela assists her clients in documenting workouts and restructuring commercial, real estate and other lending transactions.

Angela is on the Board of Trustees and Finance Committee for Canisius High School. She is listed in both The Best Lawyers in America® and Upstate New York Super Lawyers®. Angela was also named to this year's Business First Power 200 Women List.



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JODY E. BRIANDI  
Hurwitz Fine P.C.

with the women I interact with along the way, whether it's at my firm, at a board or in a professional organization. The success of women in the community is critically important as we move forward.” Women mentoring women might help offset the reality that women leave the practice of law the further they move toward leadership positions, she said.

#### **Words of wisdom**

The panelists had well-founded advice to go around to women lawyers, particularly those seeking a path to leadership and others contemplating opening their own firm.

To future leaders, Briandi said, go for it. She recommended getting insight early on into what it takes by looking for opportunities not just in

a client,” she said. “Those are things they don't teach you in law school.”

Briandi has taken that experience to heart and uses it

to serve as a mentor to young female lawyers.

“I give a lot of myself to these young lawyers, because I care about their professional success,

and I want them to do well whether they are working at my law firm or somewhere else,” Briandi said. “Advocacy and sponsorship are driving forces



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one's own law firm, but in professional and community organizations.

"Everyone can have that trajectory professionally, if that's what you want," she said. "The benefit of today's culture versus when many of us started out is there are more women role models doing wonderful things in the community professionally, running their law firms, running their practice groups, chairing a committee. Getting involved in aspects of firm management that you don't realize at the time can lead to leadership."

Everyone is going to define leadership differently, Hemenway said. It can take many forms and in unexpected roles, such as motivating someone, creating and driving a strategy forward, ensuring accountability in a process, among others.

"We all can find leadership in very different ways in our careers and personal lives," Hemenway said. "The key is to figure out what type of leader you want to be and what opportunities there are out there that match that. It's a long path; don't rush it."

Berardi's advice applies to all scenarios: Be a continual learner.

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AMY HEMENWAY  
Harter Secrest & Emery LLP

"Be learning all the time," Berardi said. "As a brand-new lawyer wanting to be a leader, you've got to know what's going on around you. We never lived in a time when learning was so available. The best lawyers, the best leaders are those who are constantly trying new things, learning new things, failing. Failing is a really good teacher. The importance of failure is really underrated."

She said her firm incorporates failure in onboarding. The firm won't fire for failure, it doesn't manage from a place of fear.

The firm expects failure, and it expects learning from failure.

"If my attorneys aren't failing, they're not learning," Berardi said. "Taking away that fear and pressure allows the person to be a human and to learn. We expect people to own up to their mistakes and not be terrified, to put a plan in place so the mistake isn't repeated."

Miller recommended to those seeking a path to leadership to take formal management and leadership skills training. It was a very important component for advancement through the

organization at Xerox, where she worked previously, and elsewhere in the corporate world but not so much in law.

Miller said she strongly advocated for such training when she got on the governance committee at Phillips Lytle. When somebody's elevating through our organization or takes on a leadership position, such as chairing a committee, or everyone who enters partnership, they go through formal management and leadership training, she said.

"If I had my way, I would start a little bit earlier because some of the newer attorneys who are first year associates have never been in a position of having to deal with an administrative assistant or the copier room people or the person in the mailroom, and they don't necessarily know how to treat people well," Miller said. "They need to be taught that for retention and their own success in the firm."

For those contemplating opening their own firm, Coppola said, "Find your village."

She recalled reaching out to Berardi, a former law firm colleague, and other professional contacts from Buffalo to Albany who started firms for advice on how to go



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ANGELA ZWIURECKI MILLER  
Phillips Lytle LLP

on your shoulders and yet the incredible joy that comes with building a team and value where you can give back to your community,” Coppola said.

### Professional organizations

All the panelists extolled the personal and professional benefits of active membership in local, state or national organizations.

There are many, so how does someone find one that suits them? “Take your passion, and look around the community, you will find a space that you can thrive in based on who you are and what you want to do,” Briandi said.

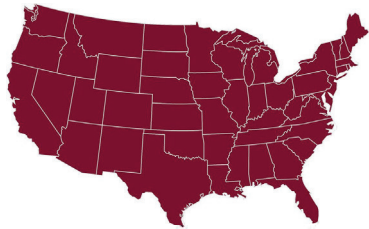
Coppola found her fit at the National Association of Women Business Owners, which has local chapters in 50 or so cities, including the Buffalo Niagara region. Coppola becomes chair

about it, especially the business operation. Lawyers know the law, but spreadsheets, not so much, she said.

Berardi and the others were

generous with their information with Coppola, and in the eight years since she has returned the favor to others who came to her for guidance.

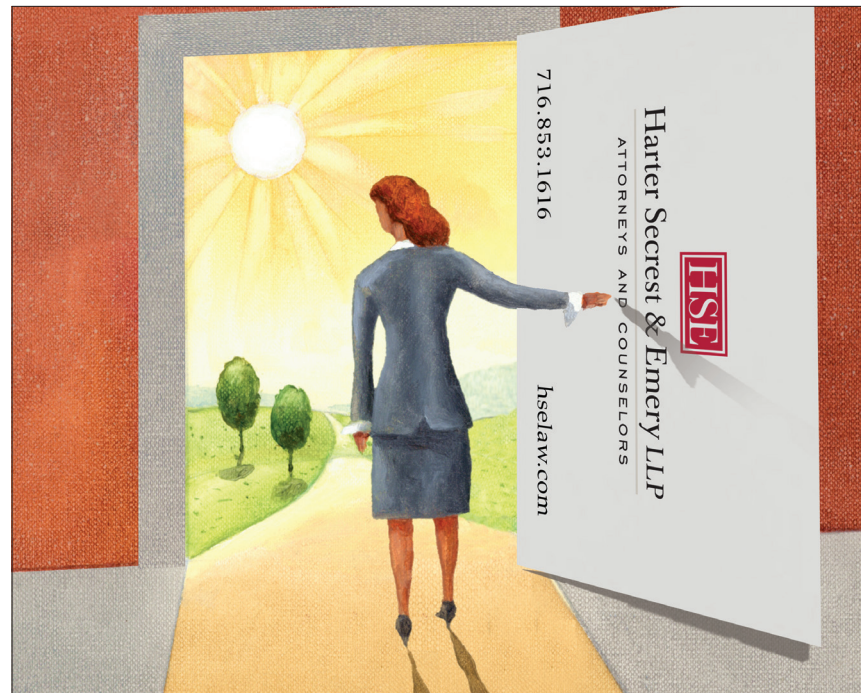
“It is incredible the numbers of us who are more than happy to talk to folks about the challenges, the excitement of it, the terror of having payroll



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of the national organization in 2024.

“Being a part of NAWBO locally and on the national level, I have been able to meet women in all these interesting disciplines that might not be classically known as female industries, hitting it out of the park across the country,” Coppola said.

The association was founded on three pillars: education, leadership and advocacy. The advocacy component involves making appeals to Washington for legislation that supports women entrepreneurs, Coppola said.

“Women do an exceptional job of pulling other women up, offering that hand down as they are climbing the ladder in their own business,” Coppola said. “We are all stronger if we support each other.”

She challenged the notion

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LISA A. COPPOLA, ESQ.  
The Coppola Firm



of the competitive nature of the practice of law, especially in places such as Buffalo, where there is opportunity to collaborate and build a stronger

business environment and community overall.

Briandi said she is passionate about the mission of the Western New York Women’s Foundation, which is built around education, advocacy and legislation on the state level, and the Amherst Chamber of Commerce, which presents opportunities to connect and network within the business community.

The organizations help promote her mission and vision, as a managing partner should help lawyers, both women and men, succeed, Briandi said. Both have programs that Hurwitz Fine attorneys are participating in for leadership training. One attorney is going through the chamber’s Emerging Business Leaders program, another is involved with the foundation’s program for emerging professionals.

“What I have found about being involved in the community is the importance of the village. For many years, I was very focused on the law firm of Hurwitz Fine,” Briandi said. “That was my universe for a long time until I started putting myself out in the community at large. It has had tremendous benefits for me personally and professionally. It provides resources for all the goals we are hoping to achieve as women leaders.”

Similarly, Hemenway has been

active with the Junior League of Buffalo to advance policy, create change and to benefit area nonprofits.

“It’s helped me learn so much about our community,” Hemenway said. “I’ve taken away so many things from the women I work with through different parts of that organization. It provides a broad base of experience and knowledge and growth for me personally.”

Everyone can find a place for themselves where they can both give and take away something that can help them grow, she said.

**Last words**

Berardi said she encourages her colleagues to have an “abundance mindset.” There is plenty of work to go around; there’s no reason to be cutthroat.

“This is a fabulous legal community; people are warm and welcoming and want to help you,” she said. “I encourage young people starting out to think about how we can do all this together.”

To new female attorneys, Miller says do not be an island. Reach out, and find a receptive set of role models to bring you along.

“Those of us who have been around awhile want you to succeed,” she said.

**Phillips Lytle Celebrates Women in Law**

**4 out of 8**  
of the firm’s Governing Committee are women

**3 out of 5**  
of the firm’s Practice Group Leaders are women



ANGELA Z. MILLER  
Banking and Financial Services Practice Group Leader  
Governing Committee Member  
Participant in the Women in Law Table of Experts

Phillips Lytle is proud to honor all women in law. Their outstanding contributions to their co-workers, clients and community are worth celebrating. Our firm is proud to lead the way in championing equity and inclusion in Western New York and beyond.



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