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 **'Passionate About Lawyers': Jeralyn Lawrence Has a Banner Year as NJSBA President**

 "She had the idea to put together a task force...which was an amazing confluence of advanced planning," said Diana Manning, managing principal of Bressler, Amery & Ross. "I think it shows the support she has in the legal community. The number of people who agreed to participate in the task force, to provide ideas for the task force, and then to get it across the finish line is nothing short of astounding. I think the name really said it all—Putting Lawyers First."



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Bar Associations



Colleen Murphy



Jeralyn Lawrence, founder and managing partner of Lawrence Law in Watchung, NJ.[Photo Credit: Lynn Goodwin .]Jeralyn Lawrence has garnered widespread praise for her New Jersey State Bar Association presidency, particularly her advocacy for attorneys, and her creation of the Putting Lawyers First Task Force.

"I very much believe in the saying, it doesn't matter what you do or say, it matters how we make you feel," Lawrence said in an interview. "In my last speech [as NJSBA president], I said, 'I hope you felt me. I hope you felt us. I hope you felt this year that we see you, we care about you, and we are here for you.'"

It's not the first time Lawrence has charted a new course.

Four years ago, Lawrence departed Norris McLaughlin with four other attorneys to form Lawrence Law. After nearly 20 years with Norris McLaughlin, Lawrence left behind positions as chair of the firm's matrimonial and family law practice, and her elected position on the firm's management committee, to chart a new course.

"I decided to go out on my own," said Lawrence. "Then, of course, the pandemic hit, which was initially terrifying. But we have grown, and now we are up to nine lawyers practicing exclusively divorce and family work."

In addition to helping her own firm, Lawrence recently concluded her term as president of the NJSBA, during which, she advocated for attorney mental health, a path back from disbarment, and a solution to the state's judicial vacancy crisis.

Attorney Advocate

"I am passionate about lawyers," said Lawrence. "I am passionate about this profession. I am passionate about attorney health and wellness, and that was the genesis for the Putting Lawyers First Task Force."

Lawrence said that this passion culminated in a 500-page report with around 200 recommendations across a very broad spectrum of issues. One of the initiatives that spawned from the report, according to Lawrence, was a \$250,000 NJSBA expenditure funding a mental health initiative that offers three free mental health therapy sessions with membership to the bar association.

"I think we had close to 400 outreaches from lawyers or family members in 60 days," said Lawrence. "It is really sad that we need it, but I am grateful we are there for them. Our Putting Lawyers First wellness study found that 10% of lawyers are suicidal, or have suicidal tendencies or ideas. When you hear 10% of your colleagues contemplate suicide, if that is not a wake-up call, I don't know what is."

Lawrence noted that the pace of law practice these days requires the ability to solve complex problems, coupled with the need for everything to be completed immediately. She called the pace one that is not sustainable.

"In the old days, you would mail a letter and get a letter back in, maybe, three weeks," said Lawrence. "Now you are getting hundreds of letters a day, that your colleague, the court, or your client would like a response [on] by the end of the business day. You cannot function, in a healthy way, at that pace."

In addition to her work on attorney mental wellness, Lawrence spent her time as president lobbying the New Jersey Supreme Court to remove question 12b from the character and fitness exam. The question deals with conditions or impairment that an applicant may have. Lawrence said that many law students and lawyers approached her and stated that they were told in law school that, if they sought mental health treatment, it would need to be disclosed.

"We want to remove any and all barriers to lawyers getting the help they need," Lawrence said.

Diana Manning, managing principal of Bressler, Amery & Ross, called Lawrence's presidency "nothing short of amazing."

The task force "was an amazing confluence of advanced planning," said Manning. "I think it shows the support she has in the legal community. The number of people who agreed to participate in the task force, to provide ideas for the task force, and then to get it across the finish line, is nothing short of astounding."

"I think the name really said it all—Putting Lawyers First," said Manning. "It really was her mission to figure out how to make life better for the lawyers of the state of New Jersey. And I think the findings of that report will have a real impact for years to come."

A Grateful Leader

Lawrence's successor at the helm of the NJSBA, Timothy F. McGoughran, told the Law Journal that Lawrence epitomizes gratitude and spreads her enthusiasm for the practice of family law, which is not an easy job.

"She spreads her gratitude for the folks who are around her," McGoughran said. "She is a natural leader and she prides herself on never saying the word 'I.' She is a team player—but don't kid yourself about who the captain of the team is."

McGoughran said, despite being quite a bit older than Lawrence, she has served as one of his role models on how to lead while being dynamic, empathetic, compassionate and grateful.

G. Glennon Troublefield, a partner with Carella, Byrne, Cecchi, Brody & Agnello, told the Law Journal he first got to know Lawrence when he applied to become secretary of the NJSBA.

“I think it is her personal touch for those who she knows and those who she doesn’t know,” said Troublefield. “It really elevates her beyond most lawyers. ... She goes the extra mile and she extends a hand to a friend and to the stranger who needs help. That is a unique quality that just surrounds her. When she walks in the room, she just lights up everything and, she is an excellent, excellent lawyer.”

‘Benefit of Her Wisdom’

New Jersey Sen. Troy Singleton, D-Burlington, told the Law Journal that he and Lawrence first met while she led the state bar’s Family Law Section, while the two were working on proposed updates to the alimony statute. Singleton shared that they did not initially hit it off.

“Oftentimes there is this yin and yang when it comes to creating public policy, especially when you have a subject matter expert and legislators who are charged with crafting the law,” Singleton said. “Sometimes there is a little bit of tension between the art of the possible and the practical when it comes to moving public policy.

“But she and I quickly moved beyond that, based on our shared love of college basketball. She’s a Duke basketball, fan and that made it tough. But we were able to work through that, too,” he joked.

Singleton said once he and Lawrence connected, they found a friendship, which allowed them to ultimately draft a very strong public policy in a positive way.

“I have often relied on her counsel ... just for her to lend me the benefit of her wisdom,” added Singleton.

However, Singleton said, beyond her accomplishments in the legal world, Lawrence takes great pride in the success of her children.

“I think sometimes we lose sight of that aspect when we are talking about people getting awards,” said Singleton. “She has been so grounded by her husband and children and her focus on family. I personally believe that has been her greatest asset, and it is why she has the empathy and compassion. ... She treats people the way she would want her children to be treated.

“She is a friend, and she is someone that I just love dearly,” he said.

Albertina Webb, a partner with Hill Wallack, called Lawrence “a very passionate, highly educated professional” who “talks the talk and walks the walk.”

“She takes your phone call if you have a question, if you have any issues you need to raise, not only about family law but about the community,” Webb said. “She cares about lawyers, at large, and that was her platform this year. And again, it wasn’t that she said she was going to do things. She actually did things.”

Webb said Lawrence “has been standing on ladders” to get the Senate and Assembly to understand the harm caused by the judicial vacancy crisis to lawyers and litigants.

“We were actually both appointed to the committee considering allowing lawyers who have been disbarred to come back,” said Webb. “She was very vocal, but she made sense and she wasn’t just talking just to hear her voice.

“She is still mothering, she’s still lawyering, and she built a building,” Webb said. “I mean, don’t you want to be her when you grow up?”

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