



# 94.

By Karen DeMeola

Karen DeMeola is the 94th president of the CBA. She is the assistant dean of student life at UConn School of Law, where she plans, manages, and oversees programs and services for the student body, including career planning, disability services, and student services. She advises students confronted with a variety of issues, including academic advising, personal matters, and wellness challenges such as addiction and mental health concerns. In addition, Dean DeMeola is charged with implementing and managing diversity programming as well as professional and community development activities.

As I begin my term as the 94th president of the Connecticut Bar Association, I keep coming back to the question: "How did I get here?"

Some might point to the CBA's commitment to diversity and inclusion. I can check some boxes. As an adopted, biracial, cisgender, married lesbian, raised as an Italian Catholic, I proudly sit at the intersection of all of my identities. To claim one over the other is not something I typically do. I cannot ignore the culture of my family simply because my genetics tell me otherwise. Nor can I pretend that the

faith that guided my childhood did not contribute to who I am today. We are all products of our families, our experiences, our society, and our culture. We are also influenced by our experiences as law students, paralegals, attorneys, and judges as well as the paths we took to get here.

Admittedly, I did feel tokenized. The pressure of being the first to step into a role previously occupied by no one who looks like you or who shares the same experiences can be a terrible feeling. It's hard for the eye rolls, dismissive comments, and lack of inclusion to not feel personal. And yet, it's completely expected when examined in the framework of stereotype threat, maintaining the status quo, and a general fear of change. But being in the room is a privilege that cannot be ignored. Change can come unexpectedly.

I have created spaces where personal authenticity is important and celebrated. For those who know me, the path to this place in time is unsurprising. Though I no longer practice, I am proud to be a lawyer. I always have been. I have spent most of

my career guiding people as they navigate to and through law school. People who are first generation college, immigrants or from immigrant families, marginalized, privileged, traditional and non-traditional, liberal and conservative. Though the impetus and the journey might differ, each person should have the access and opportunity. I am proud to bring this to the CBA. I am proud to contribute to the diversity and inclusion efforts via the Pathways to Legal Careers Pipeline program.

Under the leadership of Immediate Past President Monte Frank, the CBA has made significant steps toward increasing diversity and inclusion. Monte and his co-chairs, Cecil Thomas and Maggie Castinado, lead the Diversity Committee in furtherance of the diversity policy, and quickly cemented the CBA as a thought-leader and partner in efforts to diversify the bar throughout Connecticut. Intentional efforts by the CBA and attorneys throughout the state will continue to impact communities and will lead to a more inclusive association.

The profession has changed significantly since I practiced, and those changes will continue as time marches on. As a bar association, it is paramount that we provide access to information about those changes, and that we stay abreast of changes to our profession, whether those changes be brought upon us through legislation, judicial change, education, or technology. They are before us.

For those who do not keep up with the "Capital Update," I encourage you to do so. Bill Chapman had a busy legislative session and, along with Bobby Shea, successfully represented the positions of our members to the legislature. Our education team, led by Suzanne Hard, continues to develop programming relevant to our members and our practice areas. The entire CBA staff bring an enormous value to the CBA, not only ensuring that our members have positive experiences but ensuring that the work of our members as well as our sections and committees add value to the profession.

So, why am I here? I am here because I love being a lawyer. I love working *with* and *for* lawyers. Whether that is on the way to the profession, during practice, or transitions from or out of lawyering. I believe we are gatekeepers, protectors of the rule of law, advocates for the voiceless, and crusaders for the impoverished. We are change agents, negotiators, and skilled litigators. There is power in our profession. And I don't mean financial power. Instead, I mean the power that comes when we counsel, advocate, and tell the stories of our clients. We have the ability to change the trajectory of someone's life—personally, socially, and financially.

"With great power, comes great responsibility." Whether attributed to Spider-Man's Uncle Ben or Voltaire, the power, responsibility, stress, and high stakes nature of our profession is, at times, unmanageable and unhealthy. Lawyers are not immune to issues plaguing the greater society, but we tend to hide these issues. Recently, *The New York Times* published an article by Eilene Zimmerman titled, "The Lawyer,

The Addict,"<sup>1</sup> which highlighted the perils of our profession and the devastating consequences for some of us. Our relationships with Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, the Dave Nee Foundation, and the ABA Counsel on Lawyer Assistance Programs are extremely important to our profession and taking care of ourselves and each other is critical.

I am proud to lead our CBA. Proud to join the past presidents who have all brought their unique perspective to their leadership. I look forward to adding my voice to the narrative of an organization that has served our profession for 142 years. More importantly, I look forward to the journey with you. **CL**

**Notes**

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>, July 16, 2017.

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