

Industry Watch

LOS ANGELES DAILY JOURNAL • MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2007 • PAGE 2

Bringing Her Change-Agent Focus



ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal

"If I see something I don't like, no matter how big the issue is, I'll take it on. I'm not a status-quo person. I like analyzing the foundation of something, and if it's not right, I'm going to want to fix it," Nicole C. Bershon, incoming president of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, said of her approach to change.

By Maya Meinert
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Nicole C. Bershon, who will be installed as the new president of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles on Wednesday, will be a different kind of president from the organization's past leaders.

Not only is her enthusiasm for the job readily apparent, but Bershon also comes from a legal background in both the private and public sectors, giving her a broad range of experience to draw on.

Bershon, who will turn 40 on Friday, is an assistant inspector general for the city of Los Angeles, working with the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, which oversees the Los Angeles Police Department. She investigates complaints about and reviews investigations by the police, including officers' actions during a melee at the May Day march in MacArthur Park.

She will be the first Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles president to come from a government background since 2003, when Karla Kerlin, a deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County, was president.

"Being in government has been very beneficial because I've had a number of supervisory positions," Bershon said. "You learn how to organize and motivate, especially in a volunteer organization, where you need to motivate people to do things for you that they're not getting paid for."

She said that, although leading the association will be a challenge, she is excited about getting members involved through education and training.

Bershon said she also will be better prepared to deal with different personalities within the group, having taken mediation courses.

"Nicole displays tremendous enthusiasm and energy in her work and an openness and receptivity to lots of different people's ideas," said Katherine M. Forster, a Munger, Tolles & Olson lawyer who will become president-elect of the women lawyers group with Bershon's installation. "She encourages people's ideas on the board. She will prove to be popular."

For example, Forster recounted a time when members of the association's board and executive committee came up with good ideas that proved to be too expensive. Instead of pushing the ideas aside, Bershon reduced their cost.

"She really rolled up her sleeves and got personally involved," Forster said. "She found ways to get the ideas to work."

Jennifer Landau, the association's outgoing president and a civil litigation partner at Sidley Austin, agreed

with Forster's assessment.

"[Nicole is] patient; she's respectful," Landau said. "She knows how to work politically. She'll handle [the presidency] with ease."

Bershon initially went to law school because she didn't know what else to do. She graduated from Princeton in 1989 with a major in politics, but she didn't want to be a politician.

A self-described "change agent" who has "never been one to take 'no' for an answer," Bershon thought law might be good for her.

"If I see something I don't like, no matter how big the issue is, I'll take it on," she said. "I'm not a status quo person. So I think having the law behind you is helpful. I like analyzing the foundation of something, and if it's not right, I'm going to want to fix it. I think it was natural that I gravitated toward the law."

She jumped right in, co-founding the UCLA Women's Law Journal. She graduated from UCLA School of Law in 1992.

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Bershon started her legal career at Stutman Treister & Glatt, a Los Angeles bankruptcy firm, where she practiced for three years. But something was missing.

"I loved private practice. I think it gave me a phenomenal experience that I would never trade for anything," she said. "But that part of me that wanted to go out and deal with the community and fix things and do things was starving. But I just didn't have time."

So Bershon left and was hired by the Los Angeles city attorney's office, working in the gang unit on civil injunctions. She served as a city attorney for six years.

"I figured I'm going to be working a lot of hours, anyway; I want to feel

like I'm doing something constructive when I'm at work," she said.

Having worked in both private practice and government, Bershon has a firm grasp on the issues facing all women lawyers, most notably the struggle for a work-life balance.

"I was single when I went into private practice, and I was working a lot of hours and didn't have time for anything else," she said. "Now I have a 2-year-old child at home and another on the way, and I can't imagine working those hours. ... I see the struggle of a number of women — and men — in private practice trying to balance their work life with their life outside the office."

Because the work-life balance continues to be such a problem for many in the legal profession, especially women, one of Bershon's goals as association president, she said, will be to encourage and increase retention of women attorneys. The association and the Los Angeles County Bar Association have created a joint task force to tackle the issue.

"[Nicole is] very committed to some of the issues that I am," said Gretchen Nelson, Los Angeles County Bar Association president. "We want to stop having women quit. She's really is a terrific woman. She's dedicated to her family and her work but has married the two so that one doesn't get the short end of the stick."

Bershon also serves on the Los Angeles bar's judicial elections evaluation committee.

She also shares some of Landau's goals.

"She has a mission of continuing to provide professional and business development skills to our members," Landau said. "She wants to make WLALA a relevant organization."

Under Landau's leadership, membership increased 10 percent, to 1,000 members for the first time since 1999. Bershon plans to continue this growth by sending recruiters to law schools and undergraduate institutions to encourage women to enroll in law school in the first place.

"I'm hoping at some point there will no longer be a need for WLALA," Bershon said. "I hope that we're going to be so successful that we go out into the sunset because there's no need for us anymore. But, unfortunately, for now there is still a need for it."