

Women Honoring Women Honorees Share Their Thoughts on Giving Back and Paying It Forward

By ANN M. CARESANI & TRACEY TURNBULL

Last November, the Women in Law Section and the Northeast Ohio Association of Corporate Counsel hosted an event honoring 20 in-house women attorneys for their efforts in giving back to the community. These women work in the for-profit and non-profit sectors, and practice in many different areas. In addition to their valuable contributions to their organizations, each of these women has made a significant impact on our local community. Through the support and generosity of our 300+ guests who honored and thanked these women, we raised \$20,000 for Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and the CMBA Women in the Law Section.

Here, we hope to inspire you with thoughts and comments from some of our honorees. We would be happy to share the complete program with more information about all of the honorees and their accomplishments, upon request.

A key takeaway from our honoree's countless accomplishments is that everyone has time to make some type of a commitment to giving back. While they gave because they wanted to do so,

not because they were seeking rewards, honorees shared that the rewards and benefits from such activity can greatly exceed the underlying efforts. These rewards can include acquiring additional leadership skills and perspectives that can easily be applied to one's professional role, making connections that open doors to additional professional and personal opportunities, and fulfilling an employer's requirements of corporate responsibility and civic engagement.

Each of these women can serve as a role model for all attorneys. While the honorees have taken many different paths, one common thread is found in their efforts — a desire to give back and help others. In some instances, the motivation came from past experiences with mentors or others who helped these women in their careers. Or, it evolved from a recognition that establishing a career should not be so difficult, and that the simple act of carrying others while you climb can benefit everyone.

Janet Miller of University Hospitals explained that she finds volunteering makes life more fulfilling and fun, allowing her to see things from a different perspective and use her skills in

a different way. She is co-chairing the 2015 Go Red for Women Campaign for the American Heart Association, demonstrating her belief that work and personal lives can meld.

Cynthia Schaefer of AT&T has had the opportunity to learn about Cleveland and connect with her local community, while serving as the President of the Board of Towards Employment and the Rocky River Public Library.

Cynthia Binns of Graftech has focused her efforts on mentoring other attorneys and promoting pro bono work through the Reach Out program run through the CMBA, NEOACCA and Federal Bar Association. She has also served as a mentor for young attorneys seeking assistance with obtaining an in-house position, as well as attorneys transitioning into the role of in-house counsel.

The honorees encouraged busy attorneys considering community service to "just do it." Take the first step. Honorees noted that commitments can and should vary at different stages of your professional and personal life. While young attorneys may not have the financial ability, requisite skills and time to



MC Maureen Kyle of wKyC-tv



Sondra Miller, Ilah adkins, and Kim Bixenstine



Colleen Cotter, Gina Beredo, and anne Owensford



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become a board member of a nonprofit organization, they can become involved with an organization's annual fundraiser, and work up their way through the organization.

Gina Beredo of Nordson Corporation explained that she waited to join a board until she knew she could balance her professional commitments with personal commitments. She also emphasized that volunteering and supporting an organization can take many forms and does not always require a full-time commitment to serving. She is now on the Board of Provident House and also serves as a mentor to other professionals.

Caroline Cheverine of Cleveland Cliffs emphasized the importance of following your passions. She explained that finding overlaps with your interests and current issues can help build this bond. Ms. Cheverine moved to Cleveland with young children and joining her daycare center's board enabled her to contribute to the community while focusing on her family's needs.

Geri Presti of Forest City has served on many boards and donated countless hours of time to community service also emphasized following your passions. Her continued work and dedication to the Music School Settlement demonstrates her passion — music therapy.

Ilah Adkins of Charter One has served on many non-profit Boards, and serves as a mentor to young adults through the Adoption Network of Cleveland. Ms. Adkins noted that her community service efforts have introduced her to leaders in Northeast Ohio. As she explained, "I have served alongside many CEOs, CFOs, General Counsel and other business leaders while volunteering at local nonprofit institutions, and an added benefit of such efforts is certainly the development of business opportunities."

Assunta Rossi of DeNora spoke about the benefits she has received for her efforts serving on the Board of New Directions, an entity that serves chemically dependent adolescents. While helping adolescents, she has obtained a better appreciation for her own life.

Kim Bixenstine of University Hospitals also seeks to help people facing challenges to become productive members of society. She appreciates that she can use her career success and professional network to have a substantial impact on fundraising success in our community.

The region also benefits from the efforts of Karen Shanahan of Cleveland Clinic, who devotes her career and her volunteering toward jump starting health care innovations to provide better treatment options and regional job growth. She has also worked to support small colleges in Ohio to retain talent in the state.

Sonali Wilson views giving back as a part of her nature. When asked about her volunteer activities, she began with "I don't do much." After a thinking for a moment, she began naming a few things, and then a few more. Finally, she concluded that she was "just raised that way."

We hope these women have inspired you to take the first step, or take another step, toward giving the Northeast Ohio community the valuable gift of your time, talent, and passion. We know they inspired us, and everyone who attended the event.



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