

Bar *Bulletin*



Serving the San Luis Obispo County Legal Community

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The Gold Standard

WLA Honors Two Who Help Empower Women



From left: Presenter, Hon. Judge Dodie Harman; Patricia Ashbaugh – Outstanding Women Lawyer Award; WLA President, Ellen Drews; Kara Stein-Conaway – Rising Star Award; Presenter, Lisa Sperow

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WLA Honors Two Who Help Empower Women

Patricia Ashbaugh—Outstanding Women Lawyer Award
Kara Stein-Conaway—Rising Star Award

by Tara Jacobi, for the WLA



*Kara Stein-Conaway—
Rising Star Award*

In 2012, the Women Lawyers Association (WLA) created the Outstanding Women Lawyer Award, known as the OWL Award, to honor a female attorney in San Luis Obispo County who promotes the advancement of women within our community. The OWL Award is presented annually, in March, in honor of Women's History Month.

Two years later, we created the Rising Star Award that allows us to also recognize younger

lawyers who have practiced 10 years or less, but who are no less in their actions promoting the advancement of women.

This year, the WLA presented Patricia Ashbaugh with the OWL Award for her many firsts—first female law partner in the county, first female public defender in the county—and her efforts founding our organization. The WLA also presented Kara Stein-Conaway the Rising Star Award for her example of leadership in the management of her criminal defense firm. Remarkably, both recipients are criminal defense attorneys, lending us the opportunity to inquire more about what it is like to be a female, criminal defense attorney here in San Luis Obispo County.

Both recipients seem to have criminal defense in their DNA. As an undergraduate at UC Davis, Patricia Ashbaugh worked at the Solana County Public Defender's Office, the Department of Corrections and the Sacramento Municipal Court. She said she soon realized from those experiences that social justice and criminal law were a perfect fit.

Kara Stein-Conaway's mother is a therapist and psychologist, and her father, Jeff Stein, is a criminal defense attorney. She admires

both of them—and the work that they do for others—immensely. After finishing her undergraduate degree, she was a case manager for homeless families transitioning to permanent housing. Although she felt the work was meaningful, she wanted to be able to advocate with more tools, and so she went to law school. She began working as a criminal defense attorney in 2008.

When asked what motivates these two women, Patricia Ashbaugh said that it is the life stories of her clients that motivate her. She said that she realizes the challenges they face resulting from poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, lack of education and homelessness. Often, one or more of these factors leads them into the criminal justice system. Ashbaugh said, "Whatever assistance I can give to extract them and bring justice, causes me to keep going. I realize how lucky I am."

Stein-Conaway said, "Having the skills and training to stand up for what I believe is right in the face of injustice is a power I am so grateful to cultivate, develop and use to benefit my clients and to use to improve the criminal justice system as a whole."

Both Ashbaugh and Stein-

Conaway shared a glimpse of what it is like to work in the difficult field of criminal defense.

"I think it is a calling and you either love it and it is your career, or you hate it and get out quickly," said Ashbaugh. "As a public defender, you can't really look to see who 'wins.' Quite honestly, no one really comes out of the process without some scars. The goal is to make sure that everyone does their job and the system remains balanced and honest."

Stein-Conaway said that she meets her clients at a time when they are struggling, and many times they are experiencing shame, embarrassment, anger and fear. "I get to be present with them in that very difficult time. For me to develop a plan that addresses their short-term crisis, and sometimes more long-term challenges, requires immense vulnerability on their part. I get to be there for that. They open up to me. I am so honored to be allowed into that space. Having that connection and offering help in what is sometimes the darkest moment in their lives is immensely rewarding."

Because the WLA presents these awards to outstanding women in our legal community, both women described some of

the struggles shared by many females in leadership. Ashbaugh said, "I believe that culturally there still exists a belief that men are, or should be, the head of the household. I think that attitude carries over to the work environment. As we see more women on the judicial bench and holding public offices, I believe that it makes it easier for each woman who comes along to serve in a leadership role."

Stein-Conaway gracefully expressed the difficulties of female leaders by saying, "One barrier is the fact that many women are striving to fit into a workforce model or leadership framework that was not created with us in mind. It was defined for men and with the terrible idea that men didn't need to dedicate much time to their families!"

In order to rectify this unsuitable workforce model, she said, "First, we must recognize ourselves as fully worthy human beings. Second, we must honor and celebrate our unique contributions, perspectives and abilities. Third, we must demand the flexibility and creativity to design environments where we realize our unbounded dreams, never apologizing for dancing a beautiful dance that includes investing



*Patricia Ashbaugh—
Outstanding Women Lawyer Award*

time and love into our families, friends and communities."

Both of these amazing women are richly deserving of the awards presented by the WLA. And it is certain that both of these exceptional women will continue to inspire others to achieve their dreams.

The WLA accepts applications for both the OWL Award and the Rising Star Award throughout the year. Look for an application at the WLA website, www.wlaslo.org. ■