

## FOCUS ON



Cynthia J. Borrelli is a member of Bressler, Amery & Ross, P.C. of Florham Park, NJ and concentrates in the area of insurance regulation, representing insurance companies and other regulated entities. Ms. Borrelli is a member and former Chair of the Public Regulation of Insurance Law Committee of the Tort and Insurance Practice Section of the ABA; a member of the Federation of Regulatory Counsel, the Life, Health and Disability Insurance Committee of the Federation of Defense & Corporate Counsel; and the ABA's Life Insurance Law Committee. She is also a current member of the New Jersey State Bar Association's Diversity Committee, the New Jersey Corporate Counsel Association's Diversity Committee and her firm's Executive and Diversity Committees. Ms. Borrelli is a graduate of Lehigh University (B.A. 1982) and Seton Hall University School of Law (J.D. 1985). Visit: [Bressler, Amery & Ross, P.C.](#) Contact: [Cynthia Borelli](#)

### **An Interview With Cynthia J. Borelli**

*Measure yourself and present yourself as a "good lawyer," not a "woman lawyer," and others will view you that way*

#### **TCL What is your practice area? How long have you been practicing?**

My area is insurance regulation/corporate financial services. It includes enforcement actions; administrative appeals; transactional work for life, annuity, health, and property/casualty insurance-related entities; managed care work; product development and insurer insolvency. I have been practicing since 1985, nearly 23 years.

#### **TCL What do women wish they'd learned in law school that wasn't covered?**

I wish they had taught us that while women can have it all, they cannot necessarily have it all at the same time, and that balance is not so easy to achieve. Reasonable goals need to be set.

#### **TCL Do you think women are better suited for any particular kinds of legal practice as opposed to others?**

I absolutely do not believe gender plays a role in the nature of one's practice; however, life decisions and family needs often drive attorneys (both men and women) to one area of law as opposed to another.

#### **TCL How can a woman best evaluate a law firm she is considering working for?**

Consider whether there are opportunities for all lawyers without regard to race, creed or color. Is there flexibility, the ability to market, mentor and be mentored and to build your own practice without regard to bias of any sort?

**TCL Do you perceive any differences in the ways in which women and men lawyers are evaluated by their firms?**

I honestly do not although I do think there was an initial expectation in the legal community that women worked because they had to, not because they wanted to. I think that this perception has been substantially eroded in the last 23 years. I also do not think it necessarily impedes success.

**TCL What practice areas, if any, do you think suffer if managed by an attorney working reduced hours? Why do you think that?**

Any practice area suffers if there is insufficient staff. If a department requires 1000 man hours per month to meet its work load, and you have only three lawyers, the practice suffers. If you have a part-timer, you need more bodies to achieve your 1000 hour goals. On the other hand, ten part-timers who are flexible when necessary can function as effectively as five full-timers. I believe the ideal practice could be comprised of both full-time and part-time lawyers and staff.

**TCL There is a common perception that women lawyers want to work fewer hours to play a more integral role in their family life or community or to be a more balanced person. Please explain how you agree or disagree with that perception**

I disagree with this perception. Most of my male partners have families and devote just as much time to family commitments as I do. I also have two women partners who are in the work force while their husbands stay home to manage the household and/or the day-to-day lives of their children. What I do see is that more of the younger lawyers (without regard to gender) want to achieve a so-called "balanced life style" without sacrificing position in the firm, the nature or size of their practice, or income. This is not a realistic position.

**TCL What needs to happen to make the "Mommy track" a desirable alternative for some women?**

I believe it is desirable for any man or woman who chooses it. Many large firms and companies offer part-time positions with flexibility, substantial professional responsibility and lucrative salaries. What is problematic is the derogatory title and that some of those who do choose this part-time path or work reduced hours are not as committed to being as flexible as they ask their employers to be. Professionals have to work extra hours at less convenient times when it is required, but can take extra time when the practice permits it. Lawyers who insist upon absolute limits will not be as beneficial to an employer and will find employers less willing to be accommodating when they otherwise would be.

**TCL Women have constituted 40% of law school graduates since the mid 1980s but still compose only about 17% of law firm partners. Imagine that a creature from another planet who has no experience with the legal profession or with gender differences asks you why there are so few women at the top tiers of their firms. How would you answer?**

Many women do perceive law firms as “sweat shops” with inflexible hours and, hence, go directly to government work or companies, as opposed to private practice. Women also often leave firms when they decide to have families because they do not believe they can balance a private practice and a family. I know from hard, cold experience that it can be done if you are flexible, open-minded, creative, organized and a solid planner. You also need to set realistic goals. If more women went to firms or stayed after they had children and were willing to work flex time or limited hours, they, too, would see it could be done and done well, with great professional satisfaction. Part of being realistic requires that a woman with a family put strong support systems in place, either with her spouse, extended family or traditional child care providers who can come into the home. A working mom needs help with her children and help to run her household. Outside of the home, day care falls short of assisting with running the household and chauffeuring kids to after school activities. While nearly 24 years of live-in help has definite drawbacks, without it, I could not function effectively in either my personal or professional life. You have to learn to accept the bad with the good.

**TCL What do firms need to do to keep top women lawyers?**

Offer part-time and flex-time to both men and women, and work to remove the often false perception that women cannot succeed in private practice by surrounding young women with others who have. The stigma that women are often perceived to be associated with part-time employment or reduced hours (and a different career path) will likely dissipate as more men make similar choices. The choice then clearly becomes a life style choice, not a gender-based decision.

**TCL What is the most egregious case of discrimination you have encountered? How did you handle it then and how would you handle it now?**

I do not feel discriminated against, nor have I seen discrimination within my firm. If anything, I have had wonderful opportunities, mentors and supporters. I do think that older lawyers may believe women are not as interested in professional satisfaction or career advancement as men. I have, however, found that those with this belief (which some might view as gender bias) quickly change their minds if an individual works hard, does fine legal work, and demonstrates a clear and keen interest in excelling.

**TCL Think of an example of a woman attorney you know who is strong and powerful, and also warm and compassionate. Please tell us about her**

My best friend is a managing attorney and officer of a large insurer. She was my earliest mentor in the legal profession, as well as a role model as a working mom. She now has two grown children, and is warm, friendly, passionate, out-going, unquestionably demanding of herself and those who work with her, powerful within her company and very opinionated. She is no shrinking violet. What makes her successful is that she treats everyone equally (which means she is equally demanding, warm and direct), regardless of gender, social, financial or professional status. You always know where you stand, what is expected of you, and whether you have met those expectations. I admire, respect and revere her more than any woman I know.

**TCL What are the benefits for women lawyers to have women mentors and role models? What are the drawbacks?**

I have had positive role models, both men and women. Each has made me a better lawyer and a better person. Women mentors can often make you feel more at ease because you have gender in common. Women may face similar issues in the profession and at home, which makes it easier to identify with one another. Commonality can be a strong bond, whatever its basis. On the other hand, a mentor in your practice area who might be a man can also be beneficial. You might have common backgrounds, family issues or outside interests. I prefer a mentor who is skilled, well-respected by his or her peers, and who is a good teacher, no matter how demanding he or she might be, as opposed to one who is just like me in every way. What can I learn from someone who is the same as I am? What unique perspective can that person bring? If women only seek or benefit from women role models, they will not integrate into the community or into their firm. You cannot be treated equally if you constantly segregate yourself or view yourself as a woman first and a lawyer second. If you take that approach, that is exactly how you will be treated.

**TCL What is the best way for women to respond to discrimination from judges, opposing attorneys, or clients?**

Accept that you may encounter it. Be polite but direct and point out your concerns. Do not challenge discrimination *per se*. Address the specifics. I also find that it is best to let little things slide and ignore them. For instance, if a male client is patronizing and you are sure it is because you are a woman as opposed to young or less experienced, ignore it, work hard, stay directed, show him that you are capable, and eventually you will earn his respect. On the other hand, if someone is blatant and offensive, say so and move on. Get the message across and return to the task at hand.

**TCL Do you have any other thoughts to share on this issue?**

Strive to do your best both personally and professionally, set realistic goals over time, and realize that nothing comes without sacrifice and flexibility. Measure yourself and present yourself as a "good lawyer," not a "woman lawyer," and others will view you that way.