

NEW JERSEY WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

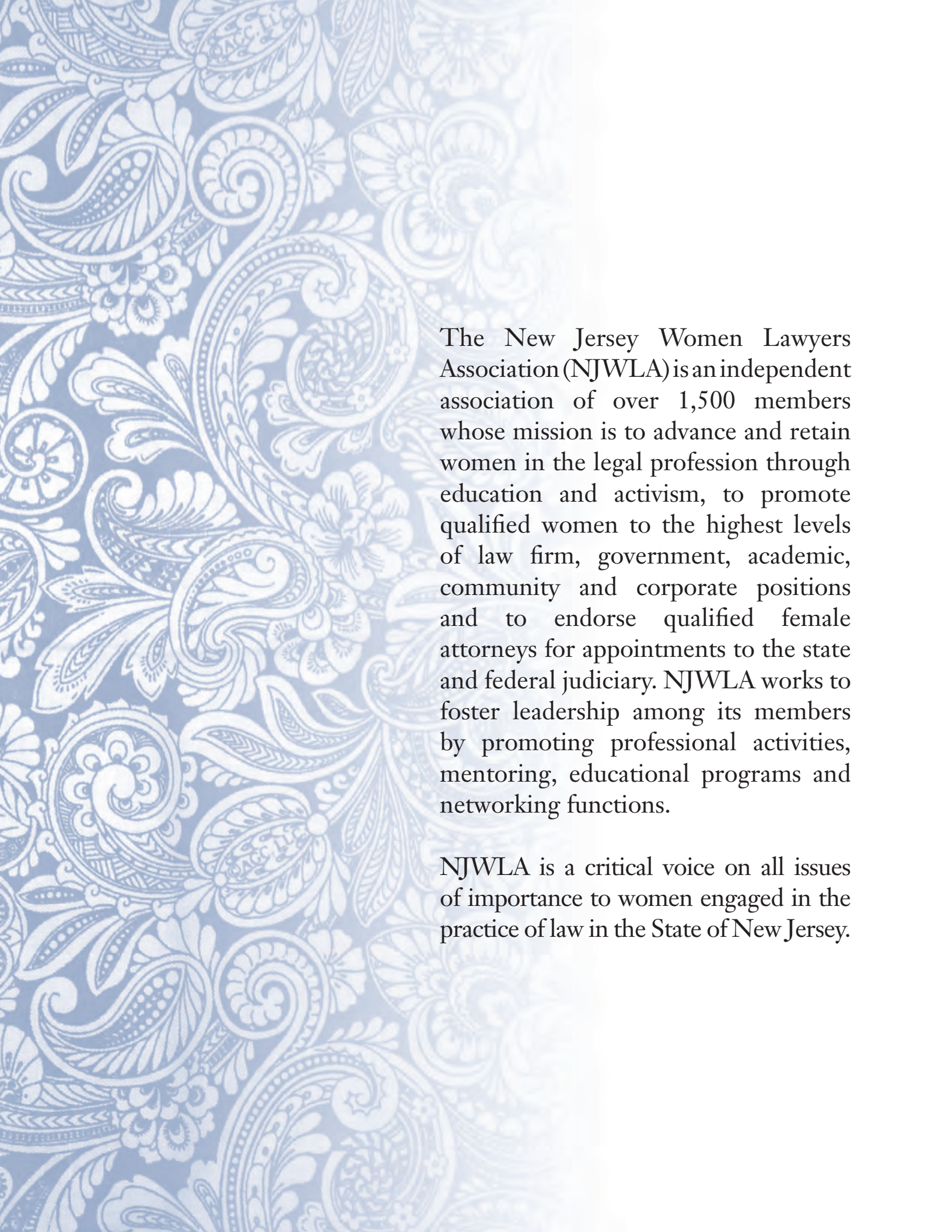
*Honoring Leaders from the
Judicial, Public, Corporate and Private Law Firm Sectors*

12th Annual

Platinum **WILL** *Gala*
WOMEN'S INITIATIVE AND LEADERS IN THE LAW

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 **New Jersey
Women Lawyers**
ASSOCIATION



The New Jersey Women Lawyers Association (NJWLA) is an independent association of over 1,500 members whose mission is to advance and retain women in the legal profession through education and activism, to promote qualified women to the highest levels of law firm, government, academic, community and corporate positions and to endorse qualified female attorneys for appointments to the state and federal judiciary. NJWLA works to foster leadership among its members by promoting professional activities, mentoring, educational programs and networking functions.

NJWLA is a critical voice on all issues of importance to women engaged in the practice of law in the State of New Jersey.

The Benefits of Setting Down Your Roots Early: What Young Women Attorneys Should Look for When Choosing a Law Firm

by Marissa A. Mastroianni

It is no surprise that attorneys who are in the job market look for organizations that offer generous benefits and support long-term professional growth. While women attorneys can find new jobs within the legal market at any point during their careers, finding the right fit sooner rather than later will likely increase the rates of retention of women in the legal profession. The law firm job market is particularly susceptible to burnout, especially amongst women attorneys. At law firms identified by Working Mother (an advocacy organization for working moms across the country) as the best law firms for women, approximately one in five equity partners are female. The sooner a female attorney finds the right law firm to promote her long-term growth, the more likely that attorney is to stay at the firm for a longer period of time (or even, perhaps, for the entirety of her career) and become integral to the firm. Therefore, to further the advancement and retention of women in the legal profession, it is imperative for women attorneys who are more junior to know how to identify law firms with the most long-term potential not only to advance their careers, but also to keep them in control of their lives and, therefore, more satisfied at work.

Unless you have a crystal ball, it is almost impossible to know whether the law firm to which you are applying will be the right place for you to set down your roots. As a young attorney who has gone through the law firm hiring process on more than one occasion, there are several predictive indicators that should factor into the equation when trying to find your long-term fit. While there are the typical benefits and programs to look for that are becoming more common among law firms, you should also take some time investigating the current attorneys who are already working at the firm (especially the female attorneys). These attorneys are good indicators as to what your life would be like at the firm. The more these considerations favor accepting a position with a firm, the more likely that firm could be the place where you could “set up shop” for a lengthy period of time. Significantly, these tips are not just limited to private practice as many of the below considerations also apply to the public sector and in-house positions.

Learning about the Firm’s Current Attorneys

Speaking with the firm’s current attorneys (both male and female) and learning about their backgrounds will provide you with insight as to the firm’s values, business strategy, and overall culture. For example, if you prefer defense work on behalf of companies, investigate how many attorneys focus in that area and review the firm’s website for representative matters or clients. If you are concerned about receiving substantive work as an associate, then you should speak to the current associates to understand the type of assignments that they are asked to complete on a daily basis. Additionally, you should consider asking current associates whether they spend time together after work to gauge the general level of associate camaraderie at the firm.

The current female attorneys who work at the law firm serve as a strong indicator of the firm’s commitment to women. Namely, these attorneys’ accomplishments, leadership roles, and quality of

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life are likely indicative of whether the firm promotes female advancement both inside and outside of the workplace. For example, women attorneys sitting on the firm's executive committee, leading practice groups, publishing articles, or holding leadership positions for professional organizations are generally good indicators that the firm may be a long-term fit and that the firm is supportive of personal goals and interests. Is being an equity partner in a leadership role at the firm important to you? Then look to see whether the current female partners at the firm hold those types of positions. If you intend to be the primary caretaker of your family, investigate whether the female attorneys serve in that role for their families. Asking questions regarding whether a firm provides generous maternity leave benefits and secondary caregiver benefits is also a good idea if you are looking for a family-oriented firm. Overall, you should do your homework on the current attorneys at the firm during the application process and then ask pointed questions during your interview(s) to learn about their life at the firm and the firm's overall environment.

The Impact of Flextime and Work-From-Home Policies

Generally, millennials value flexibility at work more so than previous generations. This desire has fueled many law firms to adopt flextime and work-from-home policies that provide attorneys with more control over their daily work schedules. Attorneys who take advantage of flextime policies can vary their normal office hours on certain days. Firms that allow attorneys to work from home either have formal policies where attorneys can work from home one to two days per week or informal policies allowing attorneys to work from home as they choose.

While looking for a firm that offers one or both of these policies to its attorneys is important, the more important piece of information to obtain is whether attorneys actually take advantage of the policies. Having a work-from-home policy is great on paper, but is rendered meaningless if associates do not feel comfortable enough to take advantage of that policy.

Women's Initiatives

When speaking to accomplished female attorneys about the successes that they have achieved, almost all of them will attribute part of their success to having a great mentor during at least one point in their career. A formal women's initiative program is a good indicator that you will have the chance to receive mentorship during your career at the firm. These types of programs can take many forms such as the existence of a women's attorney group that hosts periodic events for its members or formal women attorney mentoring programs. The advantage of having a formal initiative is two-fold. First, it indicates that the firm understands the importance of providing mentorship to younger female attorneys who are in the process of shaping their careers. Second, it provides younger associates with an organic channel to seek out the type of mentorship that they desire. Male attorneys can, of course, serve as exceptional mentors as well, but female attorneys face unique issues in the legal industry and being mentored by other female attorneys who have faced the same issues is invaluable.

Billable Hour Expectations

Billing is a large part of life in private practice. The amount of time that the law firm requires and expects you to bill will directly impact your quality of life. The quantity of hours that is sustainable will vary from attorney to attorney. Realistically considering the kind of lifestyle you want to have is essential in identifying your ideal law firm. Understanding whether the firm has a minimum billable hour requirement is important, but the most significant figure to uncover is the average amount of

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hours other associates at that firm bill per year. This average number will give you a better idea of the work-life integration at the firm.

In conclusion, there is no one-size-fits-all set of factors to consider when applying to law firms as each female attorney has different aspirations and values. The key is to not be afraid to do your research and ask the relevant questions during the hiring process as the more knowledge you have, the more informed your decision will be. The sooner a younger attorney can land a job at a law firm that provides her with the right opportunities (both personally and professionally), the more likely she is to obtain leadership roles within the firm and have a long, rewarding legal career.

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ask for lateral “on-boarding” and mid-career mentoring to excel us to a higher level of professional performance.

We should leverage our life experiences that include the care of children and aging parents with colleagues and clients. By sharing these experiences, we become more relatable as people. We become more approachable and real. We may be able to garner more understanding from clients and cultivate more sustainable relationships with them. We may even draw more support from colleagues who want to help with our professional development.

We should work towards making mid-career mentorship the norm so that those aging out of the beginning years can benefit from this step forward. Finally, we should always pass along the gift of mentoring to those coming up behind us.