



Suffolk County Women's Bar Association

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**by Valerie Manzo, Esq., Founding President; Hon. Hertha Trotto (Archivist); Margery Weinroth, Esq.;
and Heidi Levine-Sorkin, Esq., Suffolk County Women's Bar President (2022-2023)**

Like many good New York stories, the birth of the Suffolk County Women's Bar Association began in the early 1980's with countless conversations and thoughtful planning by the founding mothers meeting in their living rooms, local diners and restaurants. The Nassau-Suffolk Women's Bar Association was the only Women's Bar Association on Long Island prior to 1983. At that time, there were no women judges in Suffolk County and women were not invited to participate on the Judicial Screening Committee of the County Bar. It became essential to form a women's bar association in Suffolk County to create a laser-sharp focus on two significant issues: encouragement of judicial nominations of women in Suffolk County by local political parties and the advancement of women lawyers on Bar Association Committees and in the workplace.

The Suffolk County Women's Bar Association (SCWBA) was formally established in 1984 and became a Chapter of the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York (WBASNY) in 1987. The first President of the SCWBA, Valerie Manzo, and her Board were sworn in during the spring of 1984. Five (5) brave men stepped forward as founding members, including the Hon. Al Tisch and Ed Brown, both married to Founding Board Members: Sherri Ann Levy and Dee Brown, respectively. The need for women in the judiciary in Suffolk County was clear when Hon. Marie Santagata was asked by President-elect Valerie Manzo to drive from Nassau County to install the Officers and Board at the SCWBA's first installation dinner.

The stated goals of the SCWBA, set out in its WBASNY charter, are to: (i) cooperate with, aid and support those causes and organizations that advance the status and progress of women in the practice of law, women before the courts and women in society; (ii) encourage and facilitate the continuing education of attorneys, particularly women attorneys; (iii) enhance the mission of women attorneys, of women of the bar, bench and the general public in the administration of justice; (iv) promote the improvement and administration of justice; and (v) join in and reach consensus with other chapters of WBASNY on issues of statewide, national and international significance affecting women.

One of the SCWBA's initial goals of representation in the judiciary was finally reached with the election of Hon. Marion T. McNulty in 1988 to the Family Court, followed by Hon. Hertha C. Trotto in 1990 to the District Court and the subsequent election of Hon. Mary Werner and Hon. A. Gail Prudenti to New York State Supreme Court. The latter two made history by reaching the position of District Administrative

Judge of Suffolk County. Justice Prudenti later served as Suffolk Surrogate Judge, was elevated to the Appellate Division, Second Department, appointed as Chief Administrative Judge of New York State and now serves as Dean of the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University and the Executive Director of the Center for Children, Families and the Law. Hon. Sandra L. Sgroi, a longtime member, was also elevated to the New York State Appellate Division, Second Department, in 2009, where she served with distinction until her retirement in 2019. In addition, Hon. Maureen Liccione has ascended to Court of Claims and Victoria Gumbs-Moore has been elected to the Family Court of Suffolk County.

Many SCWBA members have now joined the judiciary, hearing examiner and magistrate ranks. Some have served as Supervising Judges of the District and Family Court of Suffolk County, including the Hon. Theresa B. Whelan, who supervised the Family Court and then became the Surrogate until her recent retirement. Hon. Georgia Tschember (deceased) was a well-known trailblazing homicide prosecutor before joining the District Court. One of our longstanding members and trailblazers, the Honorable Anne F. Meade (deceased), served by appointment on the District Court and was named as Chairperson of the New York State Public Service Commission (1987).

Our members have also served WBASNY with distinction as Presidents and been recognized for their contributions to the legal profession and their communities. Carolyn Levy (SCWBA President 1991-1992, WBASNY President 1996-1997) served on the NYS Judiciary Committee on Women in the Courts, which released the 2020 Gender Survey. Dawn Lott (SCWBA President 2017/2018) is the current President-elect of WBASNY (2022-2023). SCWBA Members who have received recognition by WBASNY for their service to the legal profession and their role in advocacy for women include: Honorable Marion T. McNulty, Honorable Theresa B. Whelan, Valerie Manzo, Hon. Anne F. Mead, Hon. A. Gail Prudenti, Linda Morrone, Margery Weinroth, Hon. Hertha Trotto, Debra Lobel, Hon. Sondra Pardes, Hon. Joan E. McNichol, Robin S. Abramowitz, Caroline Levy, Janessa M. Trotto, Jeannie Costello, Hon. Barbara Lynaugh, Hon. Sandra J. Feuerstein, Janice M. Noto and Nicole J. Zuvich.

The SCWBA has always been cognizant that we are here to serve and support the needs of our surrounding communities and those who enter the Suffolk County Court System. We do so through our advocacy and annual initiatives, including the following:

- One of the SCWBA's proudest accomplishments occurred when our then-President, Hon. Hertha Trotto, Cheryl Zimmer (SCWBA President 1989-90), Hon. Mary Werner and a dedicated team passionately advocated for a childcare center to be housed within the John P. Cohalan Complex, which was under construction at the time. Their insistence resulted in a fully supervised and beautifully run child-care center in the John P. Cohalan Courthouse, serving families forced to bring their children to court appearances. The SCWBA and SCBA host a successful fundraising event each year, called COHALAN CARES FOR KIDS to benefit this facility;
- School Supply donation drives held at the SCWBA's annual Membership Cocktail Party with the supplies distributed to needy students through local school districts and organizations;
- An October Domestic Violence Program/CLE presented in a partnership with the SCBA, which serves as a forum to collect donations for domestic violence organizations. In partnership with the SCBA, one of our founding members, Hon. Hertha Trotto, was the chairperson and coordinator on the first countywide conference on this subject;

- October Breast Cancer education initiatives, which include programs and lectures with the Maurer Foundation for Breast Health Education, participation in the Susan G. Komen Walk to End Breast Cancer, in-person distribution of breast cancer awareness material at courthouses and an annual breast cancer awareness breakfast/lecture;
- Winter Holiday Dinner fundraisers for local nonprofits, such as New Hour (supporting formerly incarcerated women, children and their families) and Every Child’s Dream, Inc. (founded by two Suffolk County Attorneys, the late Ken Mangan, Esq. and his wife, Karen McGuire, Esq.);
- A Committee co-chaired by Margery Weinroth and Valeria Manzo to participate with “Read Across America,” a national program in support of childhood literacy held each March on Dr. Seuss’ birthday. The SCWBA representatives arrive for in-person readings and book donations at a chosen Day Care Center and we hope to continue our participation in 2023.

Women’s History Month celebrations in March/April have been a forum for many signature leadership events, including:

- “Ready, Set, Lead: Empowering Women in the Political Process,” bringing together leaders of four political parties in Suffolk County, to dedicate themselves to promoting women running for elective office;
- Our combined SCWBA 30th Anniversary and Women’s History function featuring entrepreneur and former Parks Commissioner of the State of New York Bernadette Castro, with 200 plus guests in attendance;
- “Debunking the Myth of Gender Equality: Why Gender Equality Matters to Everyone;” and
- A planned 100th Anniversary of Women’s Suffrage Event, originally scheduled to take place in March 2020, which was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This event is being rescheduled for March 2023 and will be a coordinated effort by the SCWBA, the SCBA, Touro Law Center, the Amistad L.I. Black Bar Association, the Suffolk County Criminal Bar Association, the Suffolk County Columbian Lawyers’ Association, the L.I. Hispanic Bar Association and the Brehon Law Society of Suffolk County.

The SCWBA is a resilient organization, with dedicated, hardworking, accomplished members, which has endured through growing pains, economic downturns, 9/11, Hurricane Sandy and a worldwide COVID pandemic. We will continue to meet every challenge with persistence, professionalism, and a belief in ourselves and each other, which has sustained us throughout our history. In addition to the professional advancement and empowerment of women in the law, one of the greatest legacies of the organization is the lifelong friendships and generous support we provide to one another, through all our triumphs and personal hardships.