

THOUGHTS FROM THE FOUNDER OF WLIB

by: Phoebe Sehem, Esq.

Women Lawyers in Bergen began in response to a notice I placed in the New Jersey Law Journal on March 11, 1976. Headline: "Seham Announces Meeting," it invited women attorneys and law students of Bergen County to a meeting at the Heritage Diner, in Hackensack, to discuss forming an association. The Law Journal's Managing Editor, Priscilla Read Chenowith, was very helpful in printing the announcement near the calendar.

At the meeting we compared notes on our experiences. A common one, "The Incredible Invisible Woman Lawyer," feature a woman lawyer dressed neatly in a suit and carrying a briefcase hearing with legal files, approaching the front of the courtroom and being told, "You'll have to wait until the lawyer gets here." It made me appreciate Bella Abzug's decision to wear large hats to court.

At that first meeting we made plans to attend county bar association meetings together, to each other for help and information, and to set up educational programs for the organization. We began meeting regularly at each other's offices.

At first, we were a collective. Many helped; nobody had a title. I did the administrative work at the beginning, but we were very active and I had no clerical help. I asked Judith Ball to serve as Coordinator, which she agreed to do. Several of us went on working on whatever needed to be done. Our first elected President was Marguerite Simon in 1977.

What makes a founder? I had the idea, I set up the first meeting, I presided at the early meetings. And the time was ripe. Women lawyers responded and participated. If they hadn't, the whole thing would have fizzled. There's a saying: "It's not a party if nobody comes" which has recently been attributed to Betty Friedan. I think it probably goes back further. It's true: timing is essential as is communication. And people who respond.

We've helped each other; interacted with the Bergen County Bar Association; supported women candidates for judgeships; helped women in other counties start their groups. We were the impetus for the formation of the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association. We joined with NJWLA in testifying before the N.J. Senate Judiciary Committee urging the suspension of "Senatorial Courtesy" custom which allowed a single Senator to veto an appointment which otherwise would have had a majority vote. An outstanding woman jurist was in line for reappointment and was opposed by a Senator who had a local business and had lost three cases before her. The Senators weren't happy about it, but none wanted to lose his own "Senatorial Courtesy" privilege.

WLIB and NJWLA were instrumental in organizing a state wide groundswell in support of the Judge, and the Senate found a way to make a one time exception to the custom.

I got to testify before the Committee. I explained that I was the President of NJWLA, stated the issues and went into detail on the state wide canvassing of women lawyers' opinions, which were unanimously in favor of the Judge. The Committee Chair then asked me, "Are you an attorney?"

There are those who say WLIB is no longer necessary. They are wrong. WLIB provides moral support, opportunities for leadership and service to the legal profession and to the community. We have a voice. We have clout. We have a platform. Does anyone suggest that the BCBA, NJSBA, AMA, NAM, etc. should disband? Are they planning to close up shop. Not very likely. Neither are we!