

WLF Education Event – November 15, 2022

Rejecting the Myth of Superwoman, Embracing Ourselves and the Sisterhood in Law

Speakers: Sandra Ballance and Jane Dardi

Sandra and Jane identified themselves as “recovering perfectionists” and discussed thoughts they have forged together throughout their legal careers. They discussed a persona, a myth that exists in law – the “superwoman”. The “superwoman” is poised, well-read, super fit, well-travelled and young. She effortlessly dazzles without having anxiety or depression. The form of the “superwoman” always strives to achieve near-perfection with how she lives, looks and practices law. Sandra and Jane advised to be weary of this myth because she presents a suffocating paradigm.

Sandra and Jane advised that being a good lawyer does not require perfection because perfection is a crushing expectation. Perfection stymies creativity and being creative makes you a better lawyer because at your core, as a lawyer, you are a problem solver. So in order to solve problems you have to allow your brain to go into creative places. You cannot be paralyzed by fear of failing, which will happen if you strive for perfection.

The trickiness of the “superwoman” myth is that in seeking professional perfection, you develop a fear of asking for help because you do not want to appear like you do not know the answer.

Sandra and Jane also spoke about colleagues helping each other and supporting each other. They noted that if colleagues are not willing to help you, especially if you are a junior lawyer, then the fault is not with you for seeking help, the fault is with the colleagues who do not want to help.

One of the most profound topics that Sandra and Jane discussed was the need to understand what makes a good lawyer – the need to understand what kind of standards are promoted within the industry and subsequently what you value, as a lawyer and a human being. For instance, the legal profession tends to idealize the BIG FIRM and becoming a partner within the BIG FIRM is the epitome of success. But does that work for everyone? No. Does that support a family life or any kind of life outside the office?

Sandra and Jane discussed how the BIG FIRM ideal is promoted even in law schools – working downtown in a big firm is idealized. The notion that in order to be successful in a legal career, your career has to supersede everything else in your life. You have to think about whether the traditional law firm structure works for you. There is a process of indoctrination that occurs whereby the rhetoric of the “greater the billings, the greater the lawyer” is a myth. Sandra and Jane advised that a skilled lawyer is not necessarily billing the most.

They discussed how in 1991, the Vancouver Club was a male members only club and how female law partners could not attend the Vancouver Club unescorted. They recalled how even allocation of client work was done behind closed doors of this all-male club. Overcoming these kinds of hurdles takes time and patience.

Jane and Sandra talked about how at certain moments in their careers, they were in survival mode. They made decisions about having children and in order to balance work life and home life, they barely held on to their careers. However, they advised this feeling passes, so young women or women who

have practiced for 10 years or less (and were attending this event), have to hold on and not quit the profession because it will get better.

They advised that you have to be able to tolerate imperfections in yourself and others. They stressed that being out of balance and feeling out of control is “normal”. When they opened their own firm, Legacy Law, they opened it on their own terms, shaping everything from the ground up. They wanted to be in a space where they could live according to their own values and interact openly with their co-workers without having to hide their insecurities and strengths.

They recommended that in order to flourish women lawyers need to commit to talking about mental health, not strive for perfection, accept that there is no single, fixed journey in the legal profession for success and reject the myth of the “superwoman”.

Sandra and Jane discussed how important it is to forge professional alliances because as a woman and a lawyer, you need to be able to talk to someone who is going through similar experiences and who can understand what you are dealing with on your end. People who are not lawyers do not necessarily understand the hours and liabilities associated with this profession. You need someone in moments of crisis.

They also talked about the power of mentorship. Women have to have each other’s backs and not try to do everything alone. The burn out rate for female lawyers is high and appears to be highest for women who are under 40.

The last remarks that Sandra and Jane made was advice that all women in that room have to understand what their own vision is for their personal and professional lives. Once you have a clear vision, it is easier to mold your experiences to suit your vision. However, you must not aim for perfection because it is unattainable and destructive for mental health.