



Ep. 36: Uplift Panel - Woman's History Month

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In honor of Women's History Month, members of Uplift, McGlinchey's women's initiative, gathered for a multi-generational discussion about the evolution of practicing law as a woman, the importance of women as leaders and mentors, and what the future holds.

Kristi Richard:

I'm **Kristi Richard** in McGlinchey's Baton Rouge office, where I practice mainly in the insurance regulatory and corporate M&A sections. I also am the co-chair of McGlinchey's Uplift affinity group, which is our women's initiative network. On our panel today, we have first **Mary Joseph**, who is here resident in Baton Rouge, and she does creditors' rights, our self-described "Queen of Mean," representing the Boomer generation. **Kim Israel** is resident in our Jacksonville office doing commercial litigation and representing our Gen X-ers. Kim is also the other co-chair of Uplift. **Jaline Fenwick** is also in our Jacksonville office doing creditors rights, consumer financial services litigation, and most recently, regulation, which she told me she finds quite interesting. Now, we won't say Jaline's exactly representing Millennials, as close to my age, we prefer the "elder millennial" or "X-ennials" tagline. Then we have **Farren Davis** in our New Orleans office who does civil litigation and is representing the generation that's the cusp between the Millennials and the Gen Z generation.

Let's get started. Mary, you're something of a legend in Baton Rouge, both in the legal field and in your community service, as one of the first women attorneys named as a partner in Baton Rouge. What was your experience when you became a lawyer, and was the biggest change you've seen since then?

Mary Joseph:

Well, I graduated from LSU Law School in 1970, and that is a good long time ago. And when I came to school in 1967, there were about seven women in our class of 500. So as you can see, it was sort of unbalanced. Today, I think that the law schools around the country, and I think at LSU, which of, of course is my school, it's about 52% women and 48% men. And so times have certainly changed. I think that's the real question you've asked, if things have changed. Also when I graduated in 1970 (and incidentally, by that time about half the people had flunked out, so there were still seven women and about

250 men as opposed to 500. So the women stayed and the men went by the wayside.) But at any rate, in 1970, when I graduated, I had just had my first child, about two months before graduation. So I was not planning on joining the workforce in a big way at that time. However, some of my friends, my female friends in law school, two of whom did extremely well – Law Review, Order of the Coif, etc. – were in the job market. And in two different instances, they had applied to, you know, big law firms, mainly in New Orleans, and were told, “we do not hire women.” If you can imagine that. And times have certainly changed in that regard. They each got jobs and, you know, at much smaller firms or one went to work for a corporation, but you know. That's 1970 for you.

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I went to work in 1978 for a law firm here in Baton Rouge. And it was sort of revolutionary because it was 12 white men. And apparently there was a bit of a controversy as to whether they really wanted to hire a “girl” or not. And they did, but over the objection, apparently, of some of them. And I will say that in those early days when I was maybe in the judge's office or somewhere else, I got such questions as, “whose secretary are you?” or, “are you a law clerk?” “Oh, you must be a secretary. You're not a lawyer. You're kidding me, you're not a lawyer.” And you know, you can take that with humor, and I really did because most of the people who asked that were older people who just didn't have a whole lot of sense about propriety and how you might insult someone.

So it never really bothered me too much, but I think if that happened today, and I think it does still happen today, that's a whole different story. Because people should be more sensitive and more cognizant of the fact that men and women are equal in the workplace, although statistics show differently. Things have changed, obviously, in that way. And I think they also will be changing more and more, but that we still, as women, I think, have a long way to go. Because, let's face it, regardless of what people say, to share the home life, basically it's the women who are the organizers and the schedulers. And even if the man or the other helper in your family is willing, you are still the one who's the one to do it. So that's the major change I would see from 1970 to 2022.

When I joined the firm in Baton Rouge in 1978, they actually hired me to be part-time. In 1983, Mike Rubin approached me and several others and said, “let's start our own law firm. I have several clients and who will go with us.” And I had several clients who were willing to go with me. And so we started Rubin, Curry, Colvin, and Joseph in 1983, and had a wonderful practice. And then we merged with McGlinchey in 1993. We became the Baton Rouge office of McGlinchey Stafford. And I'm happy to say that three of the named partners are still with McGlinchey, and we are just still living happily ever after!



The interesting thing about being offered the job with that firm in Baton Rouge in 1978 is that they really wanted to hire a part-time "girl," and I do emphasize "girl," because what they wanted to do was to have someone consolidate their collection practice. What had been happening is that their business clients and banking clients had a lot of collection issues, and the youngest "boy" would be given that practice. And then when that boy became the next-to-youngest boy and another boy came, they gave it down and gave it down. But the clients started saying, "we don't like being moved around year by year." So that's when they decided that they would hire a girl to do the collection practice. And as it all turned out, I made it into a really, really profitable and expansive practice, which is really why Mike Rubin asked me to go with him to represent banking and credit unions. So, shows them!

Kristi Richard: Absolutely. Kim, you and I co-chair Uplift. You're involved in leadership and as a mentor, both in the Jacksonville office, firm-wide, and in local and state women's attorney groups in Florida. Why is it important to have women in leadership positions and as mentors?

Kim Israel: Thanks, Kristi. I am really excited to be part of Uplift, co-Chairing this with you and rolling it out for the rest of the women in the firm, and then beyond into the communities in which the firm has offices. For women in leadership in particular, I think women tend to understand what it's like to have a daily balancing act, whatever that balance may be – between work and home life, or commitments outside of the office and the home in the greater community at large. I think women leaders generally are able to demonstrate to other women, and in particular, younger women and those coming out of law school by way of example, in the field of law, that there is simply no limit to your potential. That the only limits that we have are the ones that we put on ourselves.

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We can drown out the outside noise. We can listen to those that tell us we're not capable of accomplishing something, and work that much harder to prove those people and the naysayers wrong. I think women are particularly and uniquely equipped to relate to what other women are going through (not just women, men as well) but in particular, what other women are going through. On any given day, any given week, any given month or year, and no matter the circumstance, that as a general proposition, we are empathetic. We care, we show concern to others, and we want to make sure that others succeed. We like to lift each other up, which is of course, particularly important to us in terms of the name of our group "Uplift," because that's really at the core of who we are as women, and what we need to do for each other to ensure that we all collectively succeed.

When it comes to mentorship in particular, I think mentors need to be really good listeners, and women generally have that as a phenomenal skill. Mentees, on the other hand, have different needs. It may be different on any given day, so it isn't always necessarily work related. It may not be case related. It may not be related to a particularly nasty opposing counsel or opposing party we have in any given case or transaction. So as mentors, women are uniquely situated to listen to each other, to really get to the heart of what a mentee might need on any given day, whether personal or business related or family related. Mentors also need to stay really flexible, meaning that you have the ability to act as a chameleon. [What your mentee needs] on one day, as I said, are different from day to day and case-related, in particular for women that are in litigation in the law, that can be a very fluid and flexible thing. And women mentors do have a tendency to be very flexible, both in their listening and their ability to provide support in changing circumstances.

Kristi Richard:

Thanks, Kim, I really loved your "lifting women up," and that kind of being the central tenant of Uplift, because that's exactly it. I've always liked both the saying and the kind of meaning that you get "lifting as you climb." I think that's important for all women to do.

Jaline, we're about the same age. If you're like me, you grew up with the assumption and being told by everyone that you can do anything that you put your mind to do, and a career as an attorney was never out of the question. Did you have the same experience and did you ever have a time when you were surprised by the double standard or encountered unfair treatment in an antiquated system?

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Jaline Fenwick:

Kristi, I did grow up in with the saying of "go out there, be who you want to be. You can accomplish it all if you just put in the hard work." And so with that in mind, my first experience in the whole "double standard or unfair treatment" came when I walked into a courtroom for the very first time. And I go in to sign up for the case and the bailiff asks me, "are you a court reporter?" And then they then turn to opposing counsel and say, "hey, she's on your case." And then they turn to me and they say, "are you the court reporter for my case?" And I tell them, "no, I'm opposing counsel." And they kind of are taken back by the fact that you're a female, I'm assuming, and that you're able to stand at a podium next to them.

What happens after that is you go before a male judge and you make your appearances, and you can tell by the judge's demeanor that he is already giving more respect and more credence to your male counterpart during oral argument. And you have to fight even harder during that hearing just so you could be heard. And so I was taken back in that, I was told I am your equal. I can be what I want to be. I am this lawyer. And then you enter the world of practice and you are not treated that way. You kind of have to

fight harder to be heard. It gave me that thick skin and I guess the knowledge to kind of learn more about who I am, and that I'm not going to let you know those kinds of things stop me. I'm going to be who I want to be and accomplish what I want to accomplish.

Kristi Richard: Yeah, great. You know, I do purely transactional, so I don't have the judge examples or the opposing counsel in that sense. But certainly, you know, when I feel I have to be more aggressive, well, I'm called a "B-," whereas anyone else, our male counterparts, they're just working hard for their clients. So, you know, I kind of take it as, you can call me whatever you want, just don't call me dumb.

Jaline Fenwick: Yeah, or when they tell you to calm down in the courtroom, when the judge tells you, you know, "Ms. Fenwick, please calm down," and I'm just arguing!

Kristi Richard: Right. I'm doing my job. Thanks, Jaline.

Farren, the legal field has progressed since Mary joined. Those Gen Z attorneys, or those like you who are on the cusp between Millennials and Gen Z, don't face the same challenges, thankfully, that previous generations did. What do you see as the next horizon for your generation of female attorneys?

Things that used to hold us back are working in our favor. So we can catch our kids' soccer game and the Zoom call in our truck and still be an amazing mom, and still be an amazing lawyer and entrepreneur.

Farren Davis: Well, first shout out to Mary because, you know, she trail blazed the way! But the future is female. We all know it. We all feel it. I saw recent data that suggests that American 20-something women are making more than men of the same age. And so I'm like, you know, "watch out, boys, there's a new show in town!" But we also see that work is now flexible, so things that used to hold us back are like working in our favor. So we can catch our kids' soccer game and the zoom call in our truck and still be an amazing mom, and still be an amazing lawyer and entrepreneur. And so we're seeing this shift in work in general, and so it's turning into our favor. We're also witnessing an age where women are sitting at some of the highest offices and on the board of directors of Fortune 500 companies, and the list can go on. It's almost a requirement to have a woman on team, on your board, for so many reasons outside of what people are thinking like for your, idea or whatever, to succeed.

I'm going to be honest and I'm not oblivious to say that nothing that the previous generations endured is what we endure today. I can think about, I was in a meeting and I was the only female in the meeting, and there were about three or four older men. And I just felt like they weren't making eye contact. They weren't trying to talk to me. And I'm like, when I left out the meeting, I kind of laughed. I'm like, you know, what my generation is realizing is that no one can make you inferior without your consent. I don't even care. I'm going to make you want to talk to me. So that's fine.



And so I think we're starting to hold men's feet to the fire and it's just different. And I'm excited about it. I appreciate all the women that trailblazed this path for us, that we can walk in such solidarity and like own it. A lot of this came from social constructs and, you know, the type of science that was out there. You know, "women are natural nurturers" and "men have this great physical strength" and height and all this stuff. Yes, that's true. That's fine. That's true. But women have this edge, when it comes to like resilience and long-term survival and this finesse right, like, we don't even have to break a sweat. We can do it without breaking a sweat. And so I think that for me, in a nutshell, that's what I feel is the future for Gen Z and Millennials.

Kristi Richard: Great. So the future is female. I like it. I like it. So in closing, I want to end with a quick lightning round where we hear from each of you, in three to five words, advice you would give to other women attorneys. And I'm going to go in opposite order. So Farren you're on the hot seat.

Have fun and be you. Get the credit you deserve. Develop a thick skin. Find a mentor.

Farren Davis: So, advice. Have fun! I know that's so generic, but like, have fun. And I'm going to mimic what I said earlier: no one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Trust in that, believe in that, walk in that, and do the thing.

Kristi Richard: Jaline, what would be your advice?

Jaline Fenwick: My advice would be to be you. Be who you are. And ladies, get the credit you deserve!

Kristi Richard: Absolutely. Kim?

Kim Israel: I agree with Farren and Jaline so much. I love their comments. Mine kind of touches back on something that Jaline said during her remarks, which is develop a thick skin. Don't take things personally. Do what you need to do to get your job done and don't sweat the small stuff. A lot of the little nitpicky things, condescending comments, passing remarks are truly small stuff. Stay focused on the task at hand. Stay focused on your end goal. Stay focused on what you need to do to succeed for your client, whatever that looks like within the bounds of the law and the rules, and just let the nastiness roll off your back. It will pass.

Kristi Richard: And Mary?

Mary Joseph: Find a mentor, whether a woman or a man. That's very important.

Kristi Richard: Very good. All right. Well thank you, ladies, for joining me today. We had a very interesting discussion and I think there are things that everyone can take away from this, both male and female. So, again, thank you and happy Women's History Month!

Thanks for tuning into this episode of "More with McGlinchey." If you have a question or would like to propose a topic, we'd love to hear from you at podcast@mcglinchey.com. For additional resources on this topic, please visit mcglinchey.com. On behalf of the law firm that brings you more, we hope you'll join us next time.



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