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Seeking the Change Within

Editor's Note: On August 12, Roxie Bacon was honored as one of five women to receive the Margaret Brent Award from the American Bar Association. Her words of acceptance, spoken before a packed house at the San Francisco lunch, were humorous and compelling, exactly in keeping with the speaker.

We asked Roxie if we could run some of her acceptance speech this month. Here are some excerpts. (Her complete speech is at www.myazbar.org/AZAttorney.)

My life didn't get very interesting until I took a sharp turn, to the left most say, and joined the Peace Corps at 19. I ended up in the Atacama desert in northern Chile, where there has never been

recorded rainfall, in a two-room house with no floor and no ceiling.

The landscape was barren, but the people were full of color.

From the families I worked with, who were dirt poor but as talented and ambitious as any cross-section of our country, I saw that the secret of success is often just the serendipity of geography.

From these brave folks whose spirits overcame oppression, I learned two inexorable lessons.

First, I know just how precious life in the U.S. is, and how important it is that we

return to being a beacon of freedom and opportunity for the world.

Second, I learned to always trust the power of the individual spirit.

Both these lessons have come back to hit me on the head in my 33-year career.

I have spent most of that career in large law firms, the fabled pinnacle of private practice. Being the only or one of few women to manage an office, chair a department, sit on the executive committee or even chair the compensation committee has given me a Ph.D. in strategic analysis of gender in the private practice of law.

And here is where the Peace Corps lessons came back in force.

First, I am an immigration lawyer, an improbable choice for a pedigreed attorney in a large-firm world. My passion is rooted in the memory of a faraway dusty town in Chile that brought me in, let me grow and sent me back to comfort without a single moment of selfishness or fear or prejudice.

Second, the Peace Corps let me—made me—trust my own spirit. That's a vital lesson.

After more than three decades, I find that private practice is still basically unfriendly to women and minorities.

We still bill hourly, base partnership and compensation decisions on hours billed and business development banked, and judge each other on a strict standard of monetary value added.

As a result, we still form committees to study diversity rather than make the changes that would actually broaden membership at every level of private practice.

Nothing about this should be a surprise. Any organization that is deemed successful by those who organize and control it is not going to change. For those who own it, it works. Very well. Moral arguments, even long-term economic arguments, are trumped by short-term benefits.

In many ways, I think women are wrong to continue to seek change from within a law firm. It seldom works, and the cost is enormous to the individual woman who chooses or is pushed to become the change agent. Instead, I think that more women, perhaps even most women, should set up their own shops, using their own values and passions and goals to determine what it should look like, what its mission is, who should belong.

To put it succinctly, the best step I ever took as a lawyer was the one through the door of my own law firm.

Diane Dear and I created a workplace and ethic that worked for clients and staff by throwing out most of the old model that actually gets in the way of production and creating ones that speak to today's clients and employees, including lawyers.

So in the spirit of Margaret Brent, who certainly eschewed the expected and sought change from outside, and in the memory of an abandoned part of northern Chile that taught a very young woman to take big chances and trust herself, I urge women who chafe in the traditional private practice model to trust your own spirits and take off. Your own wings will carry you higher, not lower, when you fly the coop.

Go create your own workplace. After all, you'll have the same intellect, judgment and energy. The big difference is that this time you get to tell yourself what to do, when and how. And it just doesn't get any sweeter than that! ☺

Most women should set up their own shops, using their own values and passions and goals to determine what it should look like.



Roxie Bacon

Roxie Bacon is a former President of the State Bar of Arizona. She is a Distinguished Fellow at Western Progress, an organization dedicated to the coordination and advancement of progressive policy solutions.