

By: *E. Quinn Hamilton*

## ***Spotlighting MBLB's First Woman Equity Member: Simone H. Yoder***

Historically, the legal field has been a male dominated profession. When asked to picture a lawyer, most people would not picture a woman. However, the landscape of the legal field is changing, and changing rapidly.

In 2010, fewer than one-third of all lawyers were women. In 2022, twelve years later, this number grew substantially with 38% of all lawyers being women. These numbers are a meteoric rise from a shockingly low 3% from 1950 to 1970. In fact, the first woman Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor was not nominated until 1981; 61 years following the woman's suffrage movement. Since then, only five more women have served as Supreme Court Justices as compared to 109 men. Despite this, the future for women in the legal field is promising. Law schools have seen a staggering increase in women enrollment across the nation, with women now significantly outnumbering men by almost 13,000 in 2021.

In terms of ownership and leadership positions, about 22% of all equity partners were women in 2020, a huge jump from 2012, when only 15% of equity members were women. For reference, many law firms have two different types of members: equity and income members (or partners). Income members are non-owner members who receive a salary, while equity members are owners of the firm and share in the profits and losses of a firm. Additionally, woman lawyers are found in greater numbers at lower levels in the law firm hierarchy. Nearly half of all associates were women in 2020, as were nearly a third of all non-equity partners. Considering that now almost half of associates are women, but only 22% of women are equity members, the legal field undoubtedly still has room to grow for women in leadership positions.

After twenty-five years of operation, Mouledoux, Bland, Legrand, & Brackett has elected its first woman equity member of the firm, Simone Yoder. As the first woman equity member of the firm, Simone took some time to answer my questions about her perspective on women in the legal field.

### **What made you want to be a lawyer?**

As the daughter of two physicians, I thought I would go into medicine. When it came time for organic chemistry, I realized quickly that medicine was not my path. I didn't know what I wanted to do after that. I graduated college and I moved to Nashville, TN. To pay my bills, I got a job as a clerk at a law firm there. The firm had a nice mix of young associates and older partners and they all seemed to really like their jobs and each other. The work was challenging intellectually and there were opportunities to collaborate, problem-solve and think critically about various issues. Seeing that, I believed law was a good choice for a lifelong career for me.



*MBLB Member Simone H. Yoder*

### **Did you always aspire to be an equity member of MBLB?**

When working at a firm, equity membership can be considered the pinnacle of success and a reward for years of hard work. It's definitely something that I strived to achieve, and the opportunity for equity membership is part of what led me to MBLB.

## **Have you found that being a woman has presented unique challenges in your path to becoming equity member?**

In some ways being a woman does present unique challenges to becoming an equity member. There are not that many female equity members from whom to receive advice, and many women drop out of law because law practice often requires excessive work hours that need to be balanced with having children and at-home caregiving responsibilities.

## **As a working mother, how have you managed to balance family life while working towards becoming an equity member?**

I am committed to my career, but I am also committed to being a mom. Practically speaking, I have found that there simply is no good way to always achieve an equal balance between my home life and work. I am constantly having to acknowledge what's important, what's not a priority, and then adjust my schedules as necessary. I am lucky to have a spouse who co-parents with me and is able to pick up any slack, and I'm also lucky to work in an environment that has a good perspective on work-life balance, and recognizes the importance of flexibility.

## **Do you think working mothers face a different set of obstacles than working fathers in the legal profession both professionally and societally?**

### **CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS:**

- From 1950 to 1970, women comprised 3% of all attorneys.
- By 2010, only 31% of lawyers were women.
- In 2022, women still only consist of 38% of all lawyers.
- In 2012, only 15% of law firm equity partners were women.
- In 2020, 22% of law firm equity partners were women, 32% of non-equity partners were women, and

Of course. For starters, mothers need time off for maternity leave, which takes them out of the workplace for months at a time. Societally, we aren't yet at a place where fathers are taking regular paternity leaves, but this leaves an imbalance between mothers and fathers in their work lives. Additionally, the childbearing years often coincide with the upswing in a woman's career, and being gone from work can present real challenges within the office itself and with getting the necessary routine exposure to clients. Also, even though fathers are much more apt to share in the parenting duties these days, mothers are still perceived as the primary caregivers, and the need to care for children can pull a mother away from work, which can then lead to questions about how committed a mother is to her work.

### **How do you feel MBLB supports you as a woman in the legal profession?**

MBLB has been incredibly supportive of me throughout my career. MBLB supported me through multiple maternity leaves and has since provided me with flexibility and remote work possibilities that have helped me achieve a decent balance between work and home life; MBLB has provided opportunity for me to be in leadership positions within the firm; and MBLB has been open and honest with me about career advancement. Most importantly, MBLB has never made me feel like my gender was a hindrance to career success.

### **What would you like the future of this firm to look like in terms of other women in leadership positions?**

MBLB already has a great crop of talented young women working here. I hope MBLB continues to work on its DEI initiatives, to hire women, and to provide flexibility to female workers to avoid unnecessary attrition of females in the legal profession. I hope to be a model for success as a working mother and that MBLB continues to be a place where women feel like they can achieve success and not struggle any more than their male counterparts for promotion and advancement.

## **CONCLUSION**

While MBLB may still have room to grow in terms of female leadership and ownership, it has made important steps in ensuring women are represented throughout the firm. Simone is a leader at Mouledoux, Bland, Legrand, and Brackett, and is a role model to the female attorneys who constitute a significant part of the MBLB attorney team. As MBLB continues to grow, it remains intentional about hiring, retaining, and promoting female attorneys to its team. In 2022, MBLB hired six new women associates (Katie Fox, Abby Unsworth, Katie Gonsoulin, Kathryn Briuglio, Quinn Hamilton and Ava Wolf) and promoted a female attorney to the role of income member (JoAnn Hymel John). MBLB commits to continuing this trend and strives to become a leader in supporting women in the legal field.