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# ATTORNEY AT LAW

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MAGAZINE®

## Features:

Linda A. Klein

— **Attorney of the Month**

MendenFreiman LLP

— **Law Firm of the Month**

## Also Inside:

- The Art of Networking
- Business Development
- Law Firm Leadership





# Making a Difference is What It's All About

By Laura Maurice

**A**s managing shareholder of the Georgia offices of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, P.C., Linda Klein's 29-year career is filled with accomplishments. One that stands out is her role as commencement speaker at the 2012 graduation ceremony of Washington & Lee School of Law, her alma mater.

"It was an honor and a privilege to address the next generation of lawyers at the institution that helped shape me and to meet some of the students and their parents," she says. "Not to mention, the weekend was a blast."

Klein's comments this past May encouraged graduates to be the best lawyers they can be, exemplified by hard work and professionalism, and to use their roles to make a difference beyond the financial rewards of the field. "While our profession is a good one for making a dollar, it's also the best one I know for making a difference, which is a lot harder and worth every effort," she said, referring to an old saying. To this point, she told the graduates that they would have to make tough choices and avoid easy-money temptations, "So dream big as you usher in the generation that follows you here, and come back to tell about your big moment of choice."

### Choosing Advocacy

For Klein, the choice was to be an advocate for her clients and

her profession. As a result she became a trailblazer for female attorneys in particular.

"Smarts" and drive propelled her to graduate from high school at 16, Union College in Schenectady, NY, at 20 and law school at 23.

According to Klein, she had always been a "joiner" and wanted to help people. She was raised in a close family and was fortunate enough to have the support of her parents as well as her grandparents, all four of whom lived to see her enter her third year of law school. It was her grandparents' influence and stories of the depression that encouraged her to go to law school to help less fortunate people. She went intending to open a law clinic for seniors, citing her grandparent's encouragement.

As she grew in the profession, she became very interested in dispute resolution and mediation and was an early adapter – some might say a pioneer – in the field. Upon graduating from W&L in 1983, she moved to Atlanta and was, at the time, the only female lawyer at her firm where she represented doctors, attorneys and architects in malpractice litigation. She stayed there for three years before moving to Martin Cavan & Andersen, where she was also the first woman lawyer. Martin Cavan & Andersen eventually merged with Gambrell & Stolz in 1993. She became the first woman managing partner at Gambrell & Stolz

in 2001 when there were very few women leading law firms. She remained in the position for the Georgia offices when Gambrell & Stolz joined with Baker Donelson in 2007. She is also a member of Baker Donelson's Board of Directors.

Today her practice includes most types of business dispute resolution, including contract law, construction law, fidelity and surety law and professional liability. She counsels clients in higher education and the pharmaceutical industry and represents fellow lawyers, major companies, schools and entrepreneurs with emerging businesses. Her cases have included solving a \$300M construction dispute, counseling college boards on the future of their institutions and helping an entrepreneur turn his company from a kitchen table idea to a \$100M+ operation. She is a mediator and arbitrator, frequently serving as a neutral party as well as a client advocate. She likes the variety of work but says her cases share the common theme of problem-solving, which begins long before a case ever reaches a courtroom. She practices dispute avoidance: planning for the client's future - for success but also for failure - thereby hopefully avoiding disputes in the process. It's a very holistic approach to law. Of course, inevitably disputes can and do arise and she relishes being a champion for clients. "Helping resolve a dispute can change lives and enables clients to move forward."

**"It's a privilege to be able to do what I do every day," Klein says. "Making a difference is what it's all about – for clients, for one's community and for one's profession."**

While Klein comes across to the casual observer as pleasant and unassuming, she is described by colleagues as brilliant, tenacious and passionate under a calm, cool and collected demeanor. "Linda can make the most complex problem seem simple, that's why clients have 100% confidence in her" says Florida attorney Steve Lesser, who has observed Klein representing clients many times over the years. Her work day is no less than 12 hours.



Photography Bill Adler

Linda and her colleagues doing what they do best, meeting client's needs.

She puts in a full day at the office then goes home and turns on the computer after dinner, often working until midnight. "I'm naturally caffeinated," she says. "And if you love what you do, you don't want to sleep. You want to work."

For her, the "work" extends far beyond her client caseload. She is very involved in the legal profession and the community. She began her bar activity with the Atlanta Council of Younger Lawyers, quickly became active in the State Bar of Georgia, and her role has expanded to the national level over time. In 1994, Klein became the first woman elected to serve as the secretary of the State Bar of Georgia and in 1997 she became the first woman president. She recently completed her 2010-2012 term as chair of the American Bar Association (ABA)'s House of Delegates, ranked as the 2nd highest office in the world's largest voluntary association. The 567-member group sets policy for the ABA, work that Klein finds particularly rewarding. "It's a very non-partisan group that really cares about doing good work." Issues being addressed range from the international legal precepts for microloans, to protecting client data in the era of cloud computing, to dealing with the impact of medical advances on legal documents such as powers of attorney. "The work of the House of Delegates can form the basis for federal, state or local legislation, or even international treaties," says Klein.

Personal causes close to her include the advancement of women in the corporate arena and the promotion of green energy and sustainable development. She currently holds numerous board of director positions, including Southface Energy Institute (an



Photography Bill Adler

Linda A. Klein is managing shareholder of the Georgia offices (one in Atlanta and one in Macon.)

Atlanta non-profit that promotes sustainable energy, where she is immediate past president), Neighbor to Family and serves on the executive committee of the Buckhead Coalition. She is a past chair of the Institute for Continuing Legal Education in Georgia and the Lawyers Foundation of Georgia, as well as past president of the Caucus of State Bars and On Board, a nonprofit dedicated to increasing the number of women in the executive suites and on the boards of Georgia's public companies. She currently serves on the advisory boards of the Best Lawyers in America and Super Lawyers.

### The Changing Landscape

The field of law has changed significantly during Klein's career. At the top of the list: technology. "When I became a lawyer, we had just gotten a memory typewriter. Now the smallest practitioner can access the same information as a large firm and, in fact, consumers can often access the same information." "The profession must be ready for the day when clients do not contact lawyers to learn what the law is, they will call, perhaps text, solely to get the lawyer's judgment."

Another big positive: diversity. "A diverse group makes better decisions for clients," says Klein. When she enrolled at Washington & Lee in the early 80s, she was one of about 20

women in her class and there was little diversity among students. Thankfully, that's not the case in 2012. "I became a lawyer when we were still counting firsts. I look forward to the day when we're not counting anymore."

"While we have a far distance to go, diversity has made courts, law firms and corporate legal departments much better. I hope this is the last generation of lawyers who has to work in a profession that is not completely diverse."

While diversity on the bench is a major change, all changes in the court system have not been for the better, according to Klein. "You have a system where judges are paid less than associates at firms. At the same time, we're asking the courts to solve problems society can't solve, with less money to do so. Something's got to give." Klein believes courts need to be well-automated and properly funded. This will make their work more efficient and effective.

And of course, today it's no longer the norm for people to stay at a company for their entire careers, especially younger generations. This is a challenge for Klein and managing partners at other firms seeking to attract and retain talent. Klein strives to make colleagues and employees feel appreciated and engaged. "We think a lot about preserving talent. Engaged employees are happier, more loyal and care more about the firm and its clients."

She feels fortunate that employees from Gambrell & Stolz blended well with Baker Donelson. "It's another change in the industry – the emergence of larger firms – and with the mergers and acquisitions there is a certain amount of holding one's breath and hoping for a smooth transition. The move has been a great fit." The Atlanta office has expanded from 30 to 70 attorneys and continues to pursue smart growth by recruiting lateral attorneys who can benefit from Baker Donelson's platform.

In a career marked by hard work and professionalism, Klein is energized by what's ahead. "It's a privilege to be able to do what I do every day," she says. "Making a difference is what it's all about – for clients, for one's community and for one's profession."

### At A Glance

In 1998, Georgia Trend magazine named her one of the 100 most powerful and influential Georgians. Atlanta magazine has named her a Georgia Super Lawyer and one of the Top 50 Women Lawyers in Georgia annually since 2004. In 2004 the American Bar Association honored Ms. Klein with the prestigious Margaret Brent Achievement Award. In 2009 Ms. Klein was honored with the Randolph Thrower Award for Lifetime Achievement and was named to the YWCA Academy of Women Achievers. Ms. Klein is also listed in The Best Lawyers in America®, Who's Who in America and Chambers USA.