

PRESS RELEASE

First and No Longer Counting: Linda Klein is Exemplary; Back in the Day, She Knew She Had to Be

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In 1994, Linda A. Klein, a construction attorney with Gambrell & Stolz, became the first woman elected to serve as secretary of the State Bar of Georgia. Newspapers across the state carried the story.

But what followed was unexpected.

"I started getting calls from all over the state," says Klein, "from women who were the victims of domestic violence. They'd say things like, 'My husband hits me, and in front of the children.'

"Those calls changed my life. I had to do something."

Klein knew nothing about family law but tapped into the network of lawyers who helped her win office, asking each attorney to take a pro bono case and assist a victim.

Then came another surprise.

While willing to handle multiple pro bono cases, the lawyers were reluctant to touch those involving domestic violence. "The last time they'd had one, the husband had come to the office with a gun or [approached the lawyer's] wife at the grocery store," says Klein, relaying their stories. "We couldn't find help for those who needed it most."

Meanwhile, Georgia Legal Services Program and the Atlanta Legal Aid Society faced huge cutbacks in federal funding. "They had to turn so many people away," says Klein. "It was heartbreaking. They told me 85 percent of those who sought help had domestic violence in their background."

Other factors compounded the heartbreak. "Studies show that when children witness domestic violence, the boys become violent and the girls wind up in the same kind of relationship," she says. "You have to break that cycle of violence."

So when she became state bar president in 1997, her top legislative priority was funding to assist domestic-violence victims. Battling long odds, she organized 66 community groups to push the cause, rallied local bar associations and public officials, and rebuffed efforts to cut the \$2 million request—designed to help 4,000 families—in half.

"We got the \$2 million," says Klein, now with Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz. "A small amount of money made a huge difference. The program returns more in benefits than it costs, and it's still going."

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