

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Baker Donelson's Donna Fraiche

*Law360, New York (February 11, 2014, 12:10 PM ET)* -- Donna Fraiche is a shareholder in the New Orleans and Baton Rouge, La., offices of Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz PC, where she is a member of the health law and public policy departments and also chairs its women's initiative. She serves as the honorary consul-general of Japan for New Orleans and served as the first female president of the organization now known as the American Health Lawyers Association. She concentrates her practice in the general representation of health care organizations, companies and individuals in major regulatory, public policy and litigation efforts.

Chairwoman of the Louisiana Health Care Commission, Fraiche is a former member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority and chaired the Long Term Community Planning Task Force and the Health Care Committee. She is president of the Louisiana Supreme Court Historical Society and was the Louisiana Recovery Authority delegate to the Louisiana Health Care Redesign Collaborative chartered to develop and oversee the blueprint for health care policy in Louisiana. She was a founder of the New Orleans Regional Medical Center, and is a diplomate of the American College of Health Care Executives.

### **Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?**

A: Actually, I never had to "break into an old boys' network" — they had to break into mine. Fortunately for me, I created my own marketplace peppered with a narrow and necessary field of expertise (health care law) that clients needed and did not seem to care whatsoever about my gender. Clients need problem solvers. They get over whether you are a male or female quickly if you can address and solve their problem.

### **Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?**

A: Making each day as exciting as the years before. The process of seniority is a mixed bag. On the one hand, you haven't got to prove anything. On the other hand, you still need to work as hard as ever to succeed and compete in a marketplace that is very much powered by cyberspace technology that entered a universe once your skills matured in another way. Social networking is foreign to me. Trying to justify that time is well spent when there is not as much of it or as many years left to enjoy is disconcerting. What is really challenging is watching younger lawyers not appreciate their talents and gifts and find that they cannot juggle the complexity of work-life balance as we were forced to with few choices.

### **Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.**

A: When I was a very young lawyer, I traveled to a very conservative and remote region of the U.S. to argue a motion for a client. While appearing before an elderly male judge, I was greeted with a warm smile and a nod as I proceeded to articulate what I thought to be a fine argument. I made eye contact and he seemed to be getting it. I knew that I was right on the facts and the law.

At the conclusion, I was asked to approach the bench, at which time, the judge reached across the desk and I was touched on the chin and told, "Little lady, you are the first of your kind to ever appear in this courtroom and in this region. You are dressed beautifully and your argument was surprisingly good. You lose." It was really hilarious at the time. I did not take this seriously as a sexist affront. I tell this true story often and get a great laugh from the audience. Today, he might be debenched for such antics.

I have been quite fortunate. I never allowed myself to be treated any other way but with dignity and respect. I did not really feel sexually discriminated in any way. I met challenging males and females in the workplace.

Once during a deposition, a particularly hostile and pugnacious male litigator began screaming at me uncontrollably. I paused for what may have seemed an eternity and then burst out laughing. In many ways, I found the effort a bit like interacting with a young son who needed a "time out." This did not go over well with my opponent, who blamed the whole exchange on the fact that I was a sarcastic woman . It would have been very interesting for him to explain his conduct to the female judge presiding over the case. Thankfully for him, it never got to that.

**Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?**

A: Outwork and out-produce everyone; be creative; use your intuition; do not be afraid of anything; make yourself available for the smallest, largest and most challenging assignments; ask for work and get outside of your comfort zone. Find networks of professional women. Support female candidates. Women do help women succeed. Just do it — or do something else.

**Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?**

A: Meet constantly with and identify the positive and negative efforts of women lawyers. It is pretty easy to tell early on who will be a success and who will falter. Intervene early and often. Give women lawyers particular assignments to help them develop business and create business opportunities for them. Make sure that the firm allows young associates time to develop their practice and their client development skills and then help them as much as you can to achieve their goals and their dreams. If there are barricades to their success, identify those and try to work through solutions to help them.

**Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.**

A: Judy Barrasso (of Barrasso Usdin Kupperman Freeman & Sarver) from New Orleans. She left a very established and old-line firm and started her own with a few partners. She is talented as a lawyer and a business woman. This is rare and to be very much respected. I also admire Meredith Hathorn (of Foley & Judell), who is the managing partner of her own bond law firm which she sort of inherited from an older, now deceased managing partner of a bond law firm.

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