

# CELEBRATING WOMEN A CONVERSATION WITH JENNA BEDSOLE



By: **Hannah Stokes**, Carr Allison | Birmingham, AL



**M**arch is an important month for women. March 8<sup>th</sup> is International Women's Day and the entire month is known as Women's History Month. In terms of women lawyers, there have been articles written about the shortage of women in the courtroom in recent years. Following a New York study, an article published in the Birmingham Bar Bulletin found that women lawyers appeared in court 21% of the time compared to men, tracking similarly with the New York data. (1). That number was even lower for substantive motion hearings and trial, versus attendance at status conferences. (2). At the same time, the number of women enrolled in law schools nationwide actually surpassed the number of male law student enrollees in 2016. (3).

Why is this information important to us? Because there are many women and women lawyers who have made tremendous impact on the legal profession and our state. With law student enrollment up, one can only imagine what the future holds for women in the law and how the courtroom data may change and grow. Law firms, including numerous defense firms, are taking the opportunity to help promote and contribute to the progress of women in the law.

In 2021, ADLA was comprised of 237-women lawyers (26% of membership). A new ADLA committee, Women in the Law (WITL), was formed in recent years with Past-President Meade Hartfield (Bradley Arant) at the helm. Currently, Martha Thompson (Balch & Bingham) serves as President of WITL, and the committee is spearheading efforts to gain even more women lawyers in ADLA. ADLA's WITL hopes to encourage and celebrate women lawyers in all areas of defense practice.

To celebrate women lawyers for ADLA's spring journal, I sat down for a conversation with Jenna Bedsole (Baker Donelson). Hopefully, this conversation sparks dialogue amongst and between women and men at ADLA law firms state wide this month as we celebrate women!



**Q. Jenna, you are the Managing Shareholder of Baker Donelson's Birmingham office and were named "Who's-Who in the Law" by the Birmingham Business Journal in 2021, while maintaining a full-practice focused on employment law. How has your practice impacted your outlook on progress of women lawyers?**

A. I love what I do — employment law is a dynamic area of the law. Every Supreme Court term, the justices address an aspect of employment law. Every major piece of legislation that goes through Congress impacts employment: health care, immigration, taxes as examples. It's always changing. I have been fortunate work with brilliant lawyers. The majority of my team is women, so when I think about the progress of women lawyers I think about my team. I am so thankful for them and the great work they do. We have fun, enjoy each other, and the work we do serving our clients in this exciting area of law.

**Q. You are also Programming Co-Chair of the Women's Initiative at your firm. What do you hope to accomplish in that role?**

A. Our goal is to provide programming to our lawyers that helps them achieve their goals, increase their leadership potential, and to network. Most importantly, our programming is typically not gender exclusive. In order for women to advance, we want and need our male attorneys to help.

**Q. In 2020, you wrote, produced and directed a film - *The Fight for the Noblest Democracy: Women's Suffrage in Alabama*. Women**

**obtaining the right to vote in Alabama is something wonderful to celebrate and reflect on. What is one of the most interesting things you learned about the Women's Suffrage Movement in Alabama when making your film?**

A. Frankly, the most interesting thing I learned was there was a women's suffrage movement in Alabama. Alabama was a microcosm for what was happening across the country as women fought for suffrage. There were women like Adella Hunt Logan, Pattie Ruffner Jacobs, Frances Griffin and Bossie Hundley who were fierce advocates for the right for women to vote. They faced a lot of animosity from both men and women who did not want women to vote.







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**Q. What do you hope people take away from the film you made, and what do you think today's legal market in Alabama stands to learn from the state's history?**

A. The movie shows that Alabama women went from community to community to talk about a cause they felt was important. They organized suffrage chapters in almost every county. When the Alabama legislature voted against a state law giving women the right to vote, those same women pivoted to push for ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Ultimately, Tennessee tipped the scales when it ratified the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Even though the Alabama suffragists weren't successful in getting their state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, they remained dedicated throughout. It's a great example of believing in something, mobilizing, and fighting for that belief.

**Q. Can you talk about an Alabama female lawyer that you have researched and admire?**

A. My passion for making documentary films started when I volunteered to do a 3-minute video for the Alabama State Bar about an inductee into the Lawyers' Hall of Fame. There were two women – one of whom was Nina Miglionico. I had heard of Miss Nina as the Women's Section of the Birmingham Bar Association has an award named after her: the Paving the Way Award. I'm not from Birmingham so I didn't know much

about her. This is what I learned: She graduated from the University of Alabama School of Law in 1936 – one of four women in her class. She opened a law office as solo practitioner during the Great Depression.



The only job offers she received upon graduation were secretarial. She took whatever case came through the door. In 1964, when Birmingham voted to change its form of government to Mayor/City Council instead of 3 Commissioners, Nina ran for office. She was the only woman elected. That City Council reversed the segregation laws in Birmingham. One year later, Nina ran for re-election and in April of 1964, a bomb was placed on her front porch. Her parents were living with her at the time. When her father went to get the morning paper, he saw the package and heard the ticking. He reached inside, grabbed the timer, and threw it in the yard before it went off. Three bombs went off that morning in other parts of the city. Nina was undeterred. She was re-elected to the City Council and served for 20 years. My three-minute film became a 56-minute documentary feature. It was such an inspiring story that I couldn't keep it to three minutes. Plus, I'm a lawyer – sometimes it's hard for us to be brief.

**Q. Women's History Month gives us all a chance to celebrate women, and women lawyers, in our law firms and practice. You've already mentioned a few women and a women lawyer that are obviously great places to start for reading and research. In addition, do you have any advice for how firms and attorneys can celebrate women this month?**

A. Go see the statue of Nina Miglionico in Lynn Park. Watch *Hidden*

*Figures* or spend money with women-owned businesses. Get together with your women colleagues, share stories and successes. Support a non-profit that empowers girls, like GirlSpring or Girls on the Run. Hug your daughter, and tell her you're proud of her.

### Links:

Citations: *New judicial study: Birmingham women attorneys trail behind men in courtroom appearances*; Birmingham Bar Bulletin, Fall 2020; [https://issuu.com/280living/docs/issuu\\_bulletin\\_fall\\_2020](https://issuu.com/280living/docs/issuu_bulletin_fall_2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Olson, *Women Make Up Majority of U.S. Law Students for First Time*, The New York Times (Dec. 16, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/business/dealbook/women-majority-of-us-law-students-first-time.html>.



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