



GRIT

The Secret to Advancement

STORIES OF SUCCESSFUL WOMEN LAWYERS

Linda A. Klein

Presented by Wendy Huff Ellard

This letter is not at all about me. Rather, I was invited to write about Linda Klein, a partner in my firm's Atlanta office and president of the American Bar Association in 2016–2017.

As an associate in the Jackson, Mississippi, office of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC, and vice president/president-elect of the Mississippi Women Lawyers Association, I am honored to write this letter describing the impact of grit and growth mindset on Linda's professional and personal lives. I knew I would learn a great deal from her approach to work and career. What I did not know is that I actually would learn far more from the way she handled her contribution to this book and her invitation to me to join her in this effort.

Linda maintains a very active general dispute resolution practice while she serves as our senior managing shareholder, all while preparing to serve as president of the American Bar Association. She also serves on numerous public and private boards and committees. To say that Linda Klein is busy would be a severe understatement. However, when I asked for time to meet with her, she replied immediately and we scheduled an interview for the next day.

In speaking with Linda, I immediately agreed with the impressions of others—her voice is almost serene, but commanding. She made me feel at ease, and she spoke every word in a thoughtful and sincere manner.

I first asked Linda what the concepts of grit and growth mindset mean to her and asked her to explain how she may have used these principles to advance her own career and what she has learned along the way.

She replied that her advice is to stay focused on the mission, no matter what you are doing. And always be a very good listener and make sure you are accessible. Linda has developed a reputation to always answer emails and calls, no matter the time. Clients appreciate the dedication and feel more at ease knowing she will

always be there. Linda also finds it very important to be inclusive, to build and keep a very diverse team. But, once you do this, you must be accessible to all team members—you want everyone on your team to feel valued. When someone feels appreciated, they are more likely to feel a personal dedication to the project and work harder to achieve a great result.

Linda mentioned a saying she often thinks of in tough situations: “The harder I worked, the luckier I got.” When you are a young lawyer, you want to be the one with a reputation of providing great work each and every time. Start with small projects and grow from there.

After Linda moved to Atlanta in the early 1980s and did not know anyone, she joined the local Young Lawyers Division to make friends and soon joined the board of directors. As the chair handed out assignments, there was one job no one wanted—and Linda took it. She was tasked with polling the bar about the new rules of court. The results of her work were published in *Atlanta Lawyer* magazine, which caught the attention of the State Bar Committee on Uniform Rules. Linda eventually would chair the Commission on Uniform Rules of Court. It was soon suggested that she run for a seat on the State Bar of Georgia Board of Governors, which she did and won. A few years later she was elected state bar secretary. A few years after that, she was elected as the first woman president of the State Bar of Georgia.

After Linda’s service as state bar president ended, she became more active in the American Bar Association. She was elected chair of the ABA Tort Trial and Insurance Practice Section and later chair of the ABA House of Delegates. She is now preparing to serve as president of the world’s largest lawyers’ organization. All a result of doing a great job with a “job that no one wanted.” All of this demonstrates how perseverance, hard work, and a laser focus on each mission—no matter how small or “unwanted” it may be—can get you closer to where you ultimately want to be.

I asked Linda if she felt she had always had grit and growth mindset traits or if she had developed these at some point along the way. She replied that she only realized she has these traits now that she looks back on her life. She always completed her

homework first. She viewed her teacher as always right, and her parents valued education over playtime. Even then, focus was very important to Linda; she says, "I believed in doing a job and doing it perfectly and that was always my goal."

I next asked Linda if she has any advice for a young attorney who is apprehensive about taking those "unwanted" assignments or those that do not have any obvious or immediate benefits. To which she replied, "Always take advantage of opportunities." Take assignments that are the toughest and you will become the go-to person for these types of projects. Make sure the person who gives the assignment understands that you have worked hard and always do what needs to be done to present a great end product. You will develop contacts that will be available to you throughout your career and will earn the reputation of being a person willing to take on the toughest or worst job and doing it well. You never know when a project could lead to much greater things. You never know who may see your work and appreciate the job done, even on a small task.

Linda explained that you sometimes get great rewards from things when you least expect it. She described one case that involved an injury on state-owned property. Three other law firms refused the case, believing sovereign immunity would likely prevent any recovery, but Linda wanted to help. She made one phone call and discovered one fact regarding the property that allowed a significant recovery. "This call took very little effort or time on my part but changed someone's life," she said.

Through the entire process of preparing this letter, I had intended to capture Linda's thoughts in a draft letter for her signature. But Linda told me she did not want to handle her submission in this way. Instead, she wanted me to receive recognition and prepare our letter as a joint product. Linda's selfless instruction as to how she wanted me to prepare the submission provided much more insight regarding her character. As my mother would say, Linda practices what she preaches. She supports the work of her fellow women attorneys and is happy to share the spotlight. She has worked very hard to get where she is today and expects others to do the same. Linda Klein is a true leader in our profession and a role model for us all.

Linda A. Klein is senior managing shareholder at Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC in Atlanta, where she focuses on business dispute resolution, including contract law, professional liability, construction, higher education, and the pharmaceutical industry. She served as ABA president in 2016–2017. www.bakerdonelson.com

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