

BUFFALO BUSINESS FIRST

The third annual Legal Elite Top 10

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See the special Legal Elite publication in the Sept. 26 edition of the Buffalo Law Journal or the Sept. 23 edition of Buffalo Business First. The full 2016 list of Legal Elite honorees will begin to roll out online Monday, Oct. 3.

The Buffalo Law Journal is proud to unveil the third annual Legal Elite Top 10.

As in the previous two years, a peer-driven selection process recognizes 10 of the most well-respected attorneys in their areas of expertise. Selection is based solely on nominations by fellow Western New York attorneys.

This year's class includes two "three-peat" honorees and some of the area's finest trial and criminal defense attorneys along with well-known mediators and arbitrators, general counsel and corporate counsel and trailblazing women practitioners. And many share the entrepreneurial spirit of having started their own firms.

In alphabetical order, they are:

- Kristen Birmingham, partner and corporate attorney at Phillips Lytle LLP
- Terrence Connors, trial attorney and founder of Connors LLP
- Lisa Coppola, litigator, mediator and founder of Lisa Coppola Law
- Edward Cosgrove, trial attorney and managing partner, The Cosgrove Law Firm
- Krista Gottlieb, mediator, arbitrator, litigator and founder of the ADR Center & Law Office
- Brian Melber, criminal defense attorney and partner, Personius Melber LLP
- Cheryl Meyers-Buth, criminal defense attorney and co-founder of Murphy Meyers
- Christopher O'Brien, personal injury lawyer, trial attorney and founder of The O'Brien Firm
- Kenneth Sodaro, senior vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary, **HealthNow New York Inc.**
- Steve Sugarman, partner and mediator, Pusatier Sherman Abbott & Sugarman LLP.

A total of 319 attorneys submitted 1,124 nominations, and the Top 10 received the most "external" nominations by peers outside their own firm. For every "internal" nomination, attorneys were asked to make an external one.



Once the external nods were tallied, attorneys had to receive nominations from more than one firm to still be considered. When it was necessary to break a tie for a final spot, we evaluated the comments accompanying the nomination to whittle the list down from the 163 men and women in the 2016 Legal Elite.

New this year is honorable mention to the Top 10: Joel Daniels, a defense attorney and solo practitioner; Kristy Berner, general counsel for First Niagara Bank; Brian Gwitt, managing partner and litigator at Woods Oviatt Gilman; Ginger Schröder, founding partner and litigator at Schröder Joseph & Associates LLP; and Kevin Szanyi, managing partner and litigator at Webster Szanyi LLP.

Kristen Birmingham

A change in law firms over the past year didn't prevent Birmingham from being selected to the Top 10 in consecutive years. A transactional corporate attorney who handles diverse matters for a range of clients, she became a partner at Phillips Lytle after leaving the former Jaeckle Fleischmann & Mugel.

According to one nomination, her dedication to clients was evident from their first meeting: "She goes above and beyond and works tirelessly to find practical solutions to the complex issues that clients face in the operation of their businesses. Her responsiveness is unparalleled."

Also impressive is her rise to partner at some of the area's most influential firms.

Birmingham has been lauded for standing out not only as one of just a handful of women who are corporate law partners in Buffalo but for always being available to clients and providing them with top-notch services: "Kristen is an outstanding corporate lawyer who provides a high level of service to her clients. The quality of her work combined with her tenacious attitude achieves excellent results for her clients. She is also an excellent example and role model for young, female attorneys."

She also was described as "smart, articulate and practical," as well as "positive and fun to work with." She is "very effective in negotiating on behalf of her clients while keeping a deal moving forward."

As one nominator said, "She knows how to get things done. ... Kristen goes above and beyond for her clients. She is always available with creative solutions and thinks of the business first."

Terence Connors

Connors has realized his vision of years ago in forming a litigation boutique firm with some of the best and brightest. In the process, he became its patriarch and is considered one of the most well-known trial attorneys in Buffalo. He has made the Top 10 for three consecutive years.

Known mostly for his work in civil litigation and as a criminal defense attorney, he earned a reputation as one of the region's most respected and sought-after attorneys, according to a nominator. He also works in business litigation, personal injury, white-collar investigation and appeals.

"He's simply one of the best trial attorneys in Buffalo, whether civil or criminal," the nominator said.

Connors has been involved in many of the region's biggest cases including the Dr. James Corasanti hit-and-run civil case and the Flight 3407 settlements, as well as, more recently, high-profile cases defending a local police officer and judge.

"Terry is recognized as the pre-eminent trial attorney in Western New York. He tends to be involved in every significant piece of litigation in Western New York," a nominator said.

Other words used to describe Connors were confident, poised, effective and tenacious. He also was credited for creating a "very good supporting team."

"One of the most prominent and accomplished lawyers in the community," a nominator said.

He is a fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and active in the UB Law Alumni Association.

Lisa Coppola

Coppola, a first-time Top 10 honoree, started her own firm after a lengthy career at Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham & Coppola and Hodgson Russ. She is “a trailblazer for women attorneys and business women and first-rate litigator,” according to a nominator.

She is experienced in employment and education law, business and entrepreneurship, personal injury and business disputes. She also is an arbitrator and mediator.

“Lisa has distinguished herself in the legal community for her courtroom ability, proven client results and commitment to our community and our profession,” the nominator said.

She is a “fabulous speaker, artistic, community-minded and courageous.”

In addition, she’s a single mother who adopted two children from China who are now teenagers.

“After battling breast cancer and being a single mother, she is someone who has the grace to handle anything that comes her way. But don’t be fooled by her grace as she is a fierce advocate and litigator,” a nominator said.

She was described as “innovative, tenacious and brilliant” with the ability to work in many capacities.

She is president of the Buffalo Niagara chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners and stands out as a mentor to others, according to a nominator: “Lisa is a mentor to so many attorneys, individuals and women throughout Western New York. Having the opportunity to know Lisa for decades and working with/for her in the past, she is an outstanding attorney and one who pulls people up with her.”

Edward Cosgrove

Cosgrove, a noted trial attorney and law firm founder, is another third consecutive pick, thanks to a legal career spanning five decades.

An Erie County District Attorney for eight years and former FBI agent, he is considered a “master of all aspects of the law.”

He was described as an “esteemed member of the Bar, ethically above reproach, and a fierce advocate for his clients.”

“This attorney has served the community and the legal community with distinction for a long time. ... He is an excellent trial attorney and an outstanding member of the Bar, the nominator said.

Cosgrove “dedicated his life’s work to protect the rights of people who have suffered injuries in the context of civil cases, as well as representing those who have been accused of violations of the penal code.”

He has “superior legal skills and commitment to clients, as well as being thorough in his work and being committed to the community.”

He is dedicated to the improvement of Western New York, a nominator said, active in community service and ready to help families and individuals in need and contribute to charitable efforts.

He is former chairman of the Trial Lawyers Section of the New York State Bar Association.

Krista Gottlieb

Ranked in the Top 10 for consecutive years, Gottlieb is considered one of the “go-to” neutrals in Western New York, according to a nominator.

As one of the architects of the Alternative Dispute Resolution program in federal court, which started more than a decade ago, she is considered a local pioneer of mediation.

Gottlieb brings to the ADR table various perspectives after being an attorney, counselor and litigator for more than 30 years. She is a mediator, arbitrator, advocate, lecturer, trainer and problem solver.

She also is the founder of a legal office dedicated to alternative dispute resolution.

"She's simply the best neutral in Western New York to assist parties in finding a resolution to their case," a nominator said.

She has "masterful skills as a dedicated peacemaker and never gives up" and she "exhibits the highest degree of professionalism."

Said another: "Krista's effectiveness as a mediator comes from her deep knowledge of many areas of law, her adept ability to grasp even the most complicated fact patterns quickly and her instinctive knowledge of human dynamics and behavior. She is able to get to the core of even the most entrenched disputes and find resolutions through persistence, where others might give up."

She is certified as a federal court mediator in the Eighth Judicial District and in the Commercial Division's ADR Program. Her reputation for facilitating settlements has led to court and attorney mediation referrals, according to a nominator.

"Krista is a devoted professional who dedicates herself to achieving honest, fair and just mediation outcomes. She works tirelessly with integrity and poise."

Brian Melber

A first-time Top 10 honoree, Melber cracked the list thanks to his skills as a state and federal trial attorney, his contributions to the legal community and his work as a teacher, according to nominators.

He has been a partner at Personius Melber since 2002. Noted for criminal defense work, he also works in business litigation, commercial litigation and personal injury.

"He's a great trial attorney and versatile. He's able to work complex litigation matters and criminal matters," a nominator said.

"Brian is very gifted," said another. "He has the ability to break a case down into its component pieces of evidence and then to analyze the prosecution's case. He has been successful in courts all over Western New York."

He's described as a "superior and skillful attorney" with "great legal ability and ethics." He is "universally respected on both sides of the state and federal Bar."

In addition, Melber is a board member of the New York State Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. He is an instructor and adjunct professor at the SUNY Buffalo School of Law where he teaches trial technique and advanced trial technique.

Cheryl Meyers-Buth

Cited by a nominator as "one of the best criminal defense attorneys in the area," Meyers-Buth is a noted criminal and civil litigator and has been a trial lawyer for more than 20 years.

Meyers-Buth, who was named to the Top 10 for the first time, is co-founder and partner of Orchard Park-based Murphy Meyers.

She was part of the defense team in the Dr. James Corasanti criminal case and appointed as referee in nationally publicized Flight 3407 litigation. She is noted for helping to clinch the Corasanti outcome with a compelling closing statement.

"Cheryl is a go-to criminal defense attorney for my clients," said a nominator.

She also started a sports agency earlier this year as founding member of R1 Sports Mgmt LLC. She is an NBA player-certified agent.

"Cheryl is such an accomplished attorney both in the area of criminal defense as well as in civil litigation. She also uses her legal talent in her other business as a sports agent," a nominator said.

She also was described as a "top litigator" and "outstanding trial attorney and counselor" with "excellent trial skills."

She is a mentor to many, a nominator said: "She is always available to assist, advise and counsel other attorneys. She has made a particular mark supporting other women attorneys in the practice of law across the Western New York community."

Christopher O'Brien

A longtime leader in the personal injury field, according to a nominator, O'Brien returns to the Top 10 after being named to the inaugural list in 2014.

A trial lawyer for more than 25 years, he has represented thousands of clients who were injured in car crashes, sexual assaults, slip-and-fall accidents and more. As one nominator said, he has a reputation for being an effective and well-prepared trial lawyer who's highly regarded by judges and their staffs.

He is "extremely knowledgeable on legal issues for each case and communicates effectively with his clients. He is an upbeat, kind and generous individual who takes lawyering seriously.

"He is never arrogant and I am impressed with his commitment to his clients. I watched him on trial and he is impressive. He was prepared and knowledgeable."

O'Brien also was described as "responsive, honest, trustworthy, hardworking and caring." He is said to practice "zealous advocacy while maintaining the civility and integrity that escape most trial lawyers of his caliber."

He is an attorney to whom other attorneys readily refer clients, said a nominator: "I have referred all of my personal injury matters exclusively to Chris and his firm for approximately the last 20 years, and I have only had positive feedback from their experience with him."

He's also known for commitment to improving the profession and teaches trial technique at the UB School of Law.

"One of my favorite things about Chris is his dedication to training and mentoring future lawyers. He dedicates time and energy to teaching trial techniques to law students. His happiness when his students succeed is contagious."

Kenneth Sodaro

Sodaro is "highly respected in Western New York's health care industry" for being instrumental in guiding BlueCross Blue Shield, parent company of HealthNow, through the complex health care law environment. According to a nominator, he "is an expert in all aspects of health care law, which enables him to guide one of the most important corporations in our community."

"Ken is navigating the region's largest health insurer through a web of ever-changing legal, regulatory and business challenges with a clear head and steady hand," a nominator said.

Sodaro, a first-time Top 10 honoree, joined BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York in 1994 and now serves as senior vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary. He is a former deputy in the San Bernardino County (Calif.) Sheriff's Department, where he assisted undercover vice narcotics investigations.

"Ken is one of the most accomplished legal professionals in Buffalo and handles highly sophisticated legal issues for one of the largest employers in Buffalo. Ken is among the elite of Buffalo's legal elite and truly a leader in his field," a nominator said. "I know of no one who has more knowledge of Health Insurance/HMO regulations, corporate governance and employee relations law than Ken."

He also is "thoughtful, thorough, strategic and a take charge leader." He is "zealous in the representative of his client."

A nominator said he "has a keen sense of business ethics and his integrity is beyond question."

“Ken is as advocate for his members and WNY but carefully chooses his battles, a balance essential to navigating a challenging health care market. ... Ken has a keen sense of not only the law but also how to use it to further, rather than frustrate, his client’s business objectives.”

Sodaro also performs community service on behalf of the Boys and Girls Club of Buffalo and Leadership Buffalo.

“I first met him when he was chair of the board of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Buffalo. Ken is a strong leader who shows the way by example,” a nominator said.

Steve Sugarman

An attorney, mediator and partner at Pusatier Sherman Abbott & Sugarman LLP, Sugarman has provided an array of legal services for three decades. He is a first-time Top 10 honoree.

A practicing attorney since 1985, he spent the last two decades training in mediation and building an alternative dispute resolution and collaborative law practice.

According to a nominator, in addition to being known for divorce mediation, Sugarman has been successful in various other mediation services including disputes involving businesses, estates (such as inheritance disputes), workplace issues (such as allegations of wrongful discharge) and organizations (such as infighting that leads to dysfunction).

“He’s built a large mediation and ‘collaborative law’ practice and conducted thousands of hours of mediations, which resulted in satisfying outcomes for the parties,” a nominator said. “He’s a great attorney and a great person.”

Described as versatile, he works in litigation, focusing on personal injury, Social Security disability, divorce and family law, criminal law, business and corporate law, estates and wills and real estate closings.

“He’s a first-class lawyer and first-class matrimonial mediator,” a nominator said.

Sugarman is adjunct professor at the UB School of Law, teaching basic and advanced mediation and mediation advocacy courses.

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