

## TABLE OF EXPERTS



PHOTO CREDIT: MARK MULVILLE

Left to Right: Jean Harris, Amanda Lowe, and Melanie Marotto at the Buffalo Business First Table of Experts Women in Law at the Hilton Garden Inn.

# Top female attorneys blazing the way for new generation

We are living in the “Decade of the Female Lawyer,” according to a study by the American Bar Association.

That 2024 study found that women outnumber men in several categories including law firm associates, general lawyers in the government, law school students and full-time law school faculty.

Those numbers might predict some momentum by women toward

judgeships, partnerships and corporate counselor positions, where men currently dominate.

Western New York’s women attorneys, meanwhile, have been reaching into those high places.

Business First recently invited women leaders in the area’s legal community to talk about their path to the top of their firms and address how they are making the way for those women who follow.

Buffalo Business First editor emeritus Donna Collins moderated the discussion.

At the table were:

- Jean Harris, partner, Pfalzgraf Beinhauer Grear Harris Schuller LLP
- Amanda Lowe, partner, Phillips Lytle LLP
- Melanie Marotto, co-managing partner, Buffalo office, Harris Beach Murtha

## PROGRESS

The law profession has changed for women in recent decades because there are many more women practicing now than when they started, the panelists said.

Marotto was one of two women in her office when she entered the field in the 1990s, now men are in the minority at her firm. The field has a very different feel now, she said.

Harris has had a similar experience and has many more women colleagues now than when she entered the law field 20 years ago. Back then, women in law brought “an outside perspective” and their presence was considered unusual.

“When you have more representation of any sort of subgroup of people you end up with not just a more comfortable place for us to practice but also a bigger influence on the subject area, the clients and the practice of law in general,” Harris said. “The number of women practicing has had a cascading effect on the way that law is practiced, even the type of things that are practiced and the way resolution occurs. All of those things have been dramatically different.”

The atmosphere in the legal circles here has become more cohesive and collegial at

the same time, she said.

Harris recalled a male partner at the first firm she worked at told her that pearls and a skirt for women was the equivalent of a man wearing a suit and tie. Marotto had a similar experience.

“I would be shocked to hear something so egregious at this point, but that’s not that long ago. That’s 20 years ago,” Harris said. “There are more women coming out of law school now so I think this is just going to be a trend that continues.”

Harris recalled during her first years practicing law feeling isolated because she was the only female lawyer in the field.

“Once there were other women in the game I ended up getting a tremendous amount more experience,” she said. “I modeled my practice and even in some cases my personal life after what I saw

them doing in terms of how they held themselves, the way they were not afraid.”

It is important for female attorneys to take every opportunity to assume leadership experience, whether it be serving on a board or performing volunteer work in the community or taking a role in their law firm, Lowe said.

To have women already in those roles and achieving in those roles is equally important because those women leaders serve as examples and even mentors to other women.

“You can move your way up the ranks. You can become a partner in a law firm if that is what you want,” Lowe said. “If that’s not what you want that’s OK. There are a lot of opportunities for women with JDs. It doesn’t have to be partner in a law firm.”

## RETENTION

Area law firms have been intentional with programs to keep young attorneys, male and female.

It is important to incentivize associates, whether it is with compensation, flexible schedules or other specific needs of the individual, Harris said.

There is a long-standing perception that there is a tremendous amount of internal competition involving who gets a client, who works on clients, who builds a certain number of hours and who brings in particular business.

“Obviously there’s going to be some sort of metric to compel people to be as good as they can,” Harris said, “but we spend a tremendous amount of time trying to build a culture that is really promoting them, and not just them but all of us, to be as good as we

## THE EXPERTS:



**JEAN HARRIS**  
*partner*  
Pfalzgraf Beinhauer Gear Harris Schuller LLP

Jean E. Harris, Esq. brings extensive knowledge of elder law, disability law, asset protection, Medicaid planning, and estate planning—including wills, powers of attorney, health care proxies, and trusts—to her work at Pfalzgraf Beinhauer. She frequently speaks on Medicaid, asset protection strategies, and the use of trusts, including Supplemental Needs Trusts. Jean is dedicated to helping clients preserve assets while securing the care they need—whether at home, in assisted living, or in skilled nursing.

She graduated magna cum laude from the SUNY Buffalo Law School and cum laude from the University at Buffalo with a B.A. in psychology. A native of Western New York, Jean lives in Amherst and serves on the Board of Directors for the Amherst Generation Foundation. She is also an active member of several professional organizations.



**AMANDA LOWE**  
*partner*  
Phillips Lytle LLP

Amanda L. Lowe is a partner at Phillips Lytle LLP where she co-leads the Higher Education Team and is a key member of the Labor and Employment Practice Team. Her litigation and counseling work spans complex business litigation, higher education institution governance, Title IX and internal investigations, employment discrimination and wrongful-termination matters, and fiduciary/trust and estate disputes.

Amanda has been listed in The Best Lawyers in America®, selected for Upstate New York Super Lawyers®, and named to City & State New York’s Trailblazers in Higher Education list and to PoliticsNY & amNY Metro Power Players in Education list. In addition to her practice, Amanda serves on the Board of Trustees of Erie Community College and the Board of Directors of the SPCA Serving Erie County, reflecting her commitment to community service. Amanda is also dedicated to mentoring new attorneys helping them grow, build confidence and develop their own leadership style.



**MELANIE MAROTTO**  
*co-managing partner, Buffalo office*  
Harris Beach Murtha

Melanie C. Marotto is co-managing partner of Harris Beach Murtha’s Buffalo office and a member of the Commercial Real Estate Practice Group. In her role, she assists her clients in bringing development projects to fruition. She serves as examining counsel for two major title insurance underwriters and also serves as closing counsel to several commercial institutional lenders. As a member of the firm’s Energy Industry Team, Melanie has developed extensive experience in property-related issues in the emerging renewable energy sector in New York.

Melanie actively participates in the firm’s Council on Inclusion and Engagement, Women Connect program and Associate Review Committee. She is a member of the Board of Directors for the NAIOP Commercial Real Estate Development Association, a member of New York State Commercial Association of Realtors (NYSCAR) and Erie County Bar Association’s Real Property Law Committee. Melanie is named to the Best Lawyers and Super Lawyers Real Estate law lists.



“When you have more representation of any sort of subgroup of people you end up with not just a more comfortable place for us to practice but also a bigger influence on the subject area, the clients and the practice of law in general.”

### JEAN HARRIS

Pfalzgraf Beinhauer Gear Harris  
Schuller LLP



possibly can. That is really important because we want them to succeed.

“We are always trying to hammer home that this is a place that should improve the quality of your life, it should not detract from it. I guarantee that years ago we all worked in that place where you just dreaded having to go in there because you did not know which partner was going to go up one side of you, what they might say and how it was going to come off. So you have to foster this positive reinforcement.”

Another practice toward retention at Pfalzgraf Beinhauer is the biweekly meeting with younger associates to review their work toward their specific goals and their next moves. The associate chooses whatever activities, the community organizations or projects that will help them develop professional relationships, and the firm takes note of their progress.

Phillips Lytle's mentorship program pairs every associate with a partner. There also is a women's litigation forum that helps associates develop courtroom skills such as arguing in court and doing depositions. At the same time, they will witness many of the area's female judges in action.

“Women make fantastic judges, and we have a lot of them now, which is excellent and so good for associates to see that,” Lowe said.

Mentorship programs also help new associates trust the experienced lawyers, Marotto said.

“I feel like sometimes these younger attorneys get out of law school and they think they should know everything especially if they're in a big firm where there are a lot of very bright people. They feel like they can never say, 'I don't know. I don't understand,’” Marotto said. “If you can establish a trusting

relationship with that attorney, they can come to you and ask questions. If they feel that we are invested in them and they feel they can trust us that goes a long way to building a relationship.”

### GENERATION-SPEAK

It is apparent that tried-and-true methods of communicating used by previous generations won't translate to younger attorneys, the panelists said.

Without applying current use of shortcuts around spelling, grammar and punctuation, some emails and messages stand to be misinterpreted. Firm leaders, well-practiced in traditional ways of communicating, need to get fully up to speed to current practice, Lowe said.

“All that worked out for a particular group for so long, and now we have to adjust, especially when we talk about retention,” she said.

To that end Harris Beach holds multi-generational workforce training that identifies long-held biases, which once identified can be surprising to some, Marotto said. The training intends to close the gaps.

“We are really trying to share information and talk to our younger attorneys about their preferred methods of communication or having them understand our preferred methods of communication just so that we are not missing something in the translation,” she said.

### WORK-LIFE BALANCE

The balance employees seek between their jobs and their personal lives is highly individualized and can change. Each person has their own idea of how to manage work and home, and this is especially true following the experience of the pandemic.

Helping employees reach their own idea

of work-life balance creates a challenge for their employers.

“We know what you're bringing to the table, and that does not necessarily mean that you have to bring it to the table between 8:00 and 5:00. It doesn't mean that you need to stay here until 7:30 p.m.,” Harris said. “I am not a big fan of remote work for myself, but I understand that it is necessary in this environment where we are today. We try to meet their needs where they are. I think that helps retain our employees.”

Hybrid work schedules work best for some, like Lowe, and can model one way of achieving work-life balance.

Lowe said her days in the office allow her to have those hallway conversations and casual interactions that can be fruitful, especially for new attorneys working their way into the profession. Also important are the Tuesday and Friday nights, when she is taking her daughter to dance classes.

“All the associates on my team know that they can call me if they need to, but they know it is an important thing for me to take care of my young daughter,” Lowe said. “That helps show them that 'Amanda's doing it, I

can do that, too.”

Individuals need to be honest with themselves that work and life won't always balance. Expecting to achieve 100% in both isn't realistic, Marotto said.

“You have to really understand what your own expectations are, what your work product is going to be, what the demands of the job are going to be,” she said. “You might have to adjust where you are during that time period because some things just maybe won't fit with your perception of what work-life balance is.”

### PRACTICING IN BUFFALO

The panelists credited the region's legal community for engendering a positive work environment that may be encouraging to those new to the profession.

“Buffalo is very nice, because I've seen the same attorneys over and over again and I feel I have built up relationships with attorneys and other firms,” Marotto said. “In some cases those attorneys have become mentors to me.”

Lowe, having clients and dealing with opposing council across the country, said she believes the Western New York bar

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**HARRIS BEACH MURTHA**  
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### Melanie C. Marotto

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**AMANDA LOWE**

Phillips Lytle LLP

deserves credit for supporting a respectful environment.

"The civility that we have here is unmatched," Lowe said. "We don't have to agree, right? But we can have a civil discussion." It is a wonderful bar compared to many, many other places."

#### ADVICE

The panelists urge young attorneys, particularly women, to have confidence in

what they bring to the job.

Marotto recalls struggling with feelings that she was a lesser attorney because she had children and worked part-time, that she was selling out by not committing to work. She said she did not value her work enough and felt she was underappreciated.

"I tell younger female attorneys in my office it is so important to recognize what you are bringing to the office even if you are home two days a week," Marotto said.

"It does not mean you are a less-committed attorney or a lesser attorney."

Harris Beach allows attorneys to become partner regardless of whether they are full time or part time, which Marotto found to be astounding, given her experience in the traditions of the legal field.

"It is really important to let young women know that that is an option, that you do not have to give up something just because you have made the decision that

is best for you and your family," she said.

And be your authentic self, Lowe said. Do not hide who you are or be quiet because you think that is what other people want to see, she said.

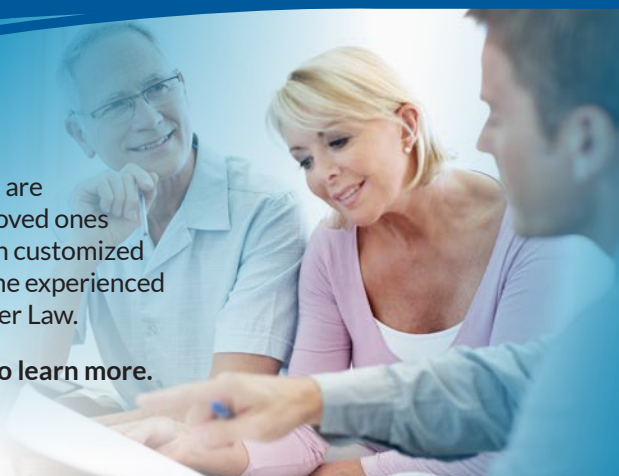
Also, enjoy the people you work with, when you do, it will not feel like work.

"It is really true," she said. "You spend a lot of your adult life at work so find some place that you can enjoy, not tolerate, but enjoy."

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