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Creating Her Own Role Model

Mary Cranston to Receive ABA Women Lawyers Award

By Anna Oberthur
Daily Journal Staff Writer

When Mary Cranston was a young San Francisco lawyer angling to become a top antitrust trial attorney, she looked for a female litigator to use as a role model — but saw only men.

“I wanted to be a sort of well-known stand-up trial lawyer,” Cranston said in a recent interview. “I didn’t see anybody who had done it that was of my gender, so I started picturing myself doing it.”

From her position today as chairwoman of Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, Cranston looked back on the days when she was gearing up to blaze a trail into the male-dominated arena of the trial court.

Shedding what she realized were, in part, her own self-limiting views of what she could accomplish as a woman in the legal profession, she began to set goals.

“I realized I had to create, in my own head, essentially the model of what I wanted to do,” Cranston said. “I set goals that just seemed impossible for where I was at the time.”

Cranston went on to become her firm’s first female litigation partner. Later, she was named a fellow in the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers.

In 1999 she exceeded her earlier goals to become one of the first women to lead a major law firm, and she has since guided the firm through two successful mergers in four years.

The 57-year-old executive has become the role model for female attorneys that she lacked — she gets two or three e-mail messages or letters a day from young women thanking her for her leadership.

In honor of her contributions to women in the legal profession, the American Bar Association’s Commission on Women in the Profession has selected Cranston as a



XIANG XING ZHOU / Daily Journal

Mary Cranston of Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman was not only her firm’s first female litigation partner and one of the first women to lead a major law firm, she helped negotiate the firm through two mergers in four years.

winner of its Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award. She is to be presented with the award Sunday during the ABA’s annual meeting in Chicago.

The prestigious award, named for the woman thought to be the country’s first female attorney, is given each year to five women lawyers who have achieved professional excellence in their field and actively paved the way to success for other women lawyers, according to Diane Yu, who chairs the commission.

Previous winners include U.S. Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. This year, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., is being acknowledged.

The point is twofold.

“It’s a chance to celebrate their accomplishments and remind ourselves that there is still work to be done to achieve full gender equality in our profession,” said Yu, who is chairwoman of the commission as well as chief of staff and deputy to the president of New York University.

“Mary is definitely a super lawyer in terms of her legal practice,” Yu said, and “she has been absolutely unwavering and relentless in her efforts to help women lawyers advance.”

Cranston “is what we call a change agent,” Yu said — someone who sparks change and expands opportunity in the legal profession.

Making change has been a priority for Cranston throughout her career.

Cranston Became Her Own Role Model

As co-chairwoman of the Bar Association of San Francisco's No Glass Ceiling Task Force, Cranston helped come up with ways for firms to keep women in the profession. More than 76 firms signed on to the task force and 63 percent of responding firms met the first goal — to have 25 percent women in partner positions by Jan. 1, 2005.

"We took proven methodology and got people to focus on it and get it done," Cranston said. "It's had a big impact."

Cranston has emphasized retaining women at Pillsbury, too.

At 25, Pillsbury's percentage of female partners is above the national average.

During the 1980s, Cranston worked to identify bias on the ABA's antitrust committee and helped to reform the section's leadership structure with regard to recruiting and retaining women, according to Yu.

She's also mentored dozens of young women and has been at the forefront of initiatives to create more gender-friendly law firm policies such as maternity leave, part-time policies and flexible schedules, Yu added.

"She's the one the award was designed for," said Barbara Babcock, a professor emerita at Stanford Law School who won the award in 1999. "It's not just that she heads one of most prestigious and impressive law firms on the West Coast or maybe in the country. She has been not just a model but a counselor and mentor of women.

"Too often, women who are in professions where their gender is outnumbered get into the habit of saying,

'I made it, so other people should,' or really buying into male ideas of meritocracy. And Mary just really never has done that."

Cranston was elected in 1998 to lead the former Pillsbury Madison & Sutro out of its tradition-bound slump and give the firm what partners realized was a much needed remodel.

At the time, Cranston and firmwide managing partner Marina Park were the first women to hold the top two management positions of a major U.S. law firm.

Seven years later, Cranston has been credited with improving Pillsbury's financial results, stemming partner attrition and pulling off two mergers, first with New York's Winthrop, Stimson, Putnam & Roberts and, more recently, Washington, D.C.'s Shaw Pittman in a deal that was finalized April 1.

Pillsbury Madison & Sutro was the oldest and largest Northern California law firm, and it was clearly the market leader for 100 years. But partly because of its venerable history, the firm was slow to pick up how much the world was changing around it, she said.

"Marina (Park) and I were definitely brought in as leaders to make change," she said. "We really did our homework right at the beginning to figure out what's the best way to lead change effectively."

Pillsbury came late to geographic expansion, but through thoughtful mergers, Cranston has substantially extended the firm's geographic reach, said Keith Wetmore, chairman of San Francisco's Morrison & Foerster.

"She pulled off more mergers than most

of us have talked about," Wetmore said. "It's really a very small group that have been successful in consummating as many deals as her. It's a testament to her skills of execution."

Regarding the success of the mergers, "you read about people quibbling," Wetmore said. "But you certainly can't quibble that she has a really significant New York office through the Winthrop merger and the firm is bigger, stronger and has a bigger range of offerings than before."

Although progress has been made, barriers certainly still exist for women in the legal profession, Cranston said, noting the senior leadership ranks of law firms are still mostly men.

"In general, in our culture, if you are thinking about a big-time leader to handle the most important issues, most people have an unconscious affinity for a tall white male. It's been proven over and over again," Cranston said.

As one of the few women heading a major law firm, Cranston admits that being asked to speak as a women lawyer can get "a little annoying."

On the other hand, she acknowledged that representing women is, in a sense, the reality of her position.

"I feel a responsibility. I feel that if I fail, I failed the sisterhood," Cranston laughed. Female executives "are still rare enough that if we fail, we're always referred to as the woman CEO that failed. And I can't wait until there's critical mass so they don't even reference it. But, you know, that's where we are. And it just goes along with the territory."

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