



WHO IS CWL? featuring Hon. Sheila Prell Sonenshine (Ret.)

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The Honorable Sheila Prell Sonenshine (Ret.) is a lifetime member of CWL. She founded a successful law firm and federally chartered bank, was one of the youngest appointees to both the California Superior Court and the Court of Appeal and is currently a neutral with JAMS. She recently shared with Audra Ibarra her thoughts on her incomparable career, gender bias and of course CWL:

What was your dream job as a kid and why?

Although I do not remember why, I wanted to be a lawyer since I was seven years old. That was 1952 when the legal profession was not something to which many little girls aspired. Perhaps it was because I was always an inquisitive and assertive child and maybe someone said “You should be a lawyer!”

What is the most fulfilling job you have had and why?

My legal and professional experience includes research assistant to my law school librarian; a legal intern at Mattel toys and Neighborhood Legal Services; founder and managing partner of a law firm; trial court judge; appellate court justice; cofounder of an international mid-market investment bank; private investor and now a JAMS neutral.

Each and every one of my positions was emotionally and intellectually fulfilling. Early on, I learned the importance of the law in people’s lives—not just

in creating and maintaining order but in establishing human rights. Working as an attorney, and then as a jurist, honed my legal skills. More importantly, it developed my fierce devotion to the importance of the rule of law and the need for an evidentiary premise.

My business experience reinforced my understanding of the law’s practical aspects: the law is not *sui generis* – it does not exist in a vacuum for its own sake – but for the people it affects.

I now very much enjoy working as a JAMS neutral. Whether working as a neutral evaluator, mediator, arbitrator or judge pro tem I am able to bring together the best of my past experiences.

What is the best decision you ever made and why?

The best decision I ever made was marrying my husband. Now 48 years later we have had a blessed marriage with 3 children (and 3 wonderful children-in-law) and 7 grandchildren. All of these years my husband has been my absolute best friend and supporter!!!

Who are your mentors and how did you come to know them?

My mentors were Judge Rutter; Justices Scoville, Rickels and Joan Dempsey Klein and attorney Gar Shallenberger, a past State Bar President.

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I got to know three of the judicial officers when I was a new attorney appearing before them. I also became acquainted with Gar during my first few years of practice through pro bono bar activities. I met Justice Klein when I was a Superior Court Judge, seeking a position on the Court of Appeal.

When did you first experience gender bias in the legal profession and what happened?

I first experienced gender bias in the legal profession as a young lawyer looking for a job. My husband, our newborn son and I moved to Orange County in 1970 right after I sat for the Bar Exam.

I wanted to do employer labor law. Only two firms in the county were doing that kind of work and both refused to hire a woman. So I opened my own office! In the ensuing years I founded the first Orange County lawyer's group focused on gender equality in the legal profession. We encouraged both men and women to join. Our mission was to educate the Bench and Bar on the existing biases and broaden professional opportunities. Originally affiliated with the Orange County Bar Association, the Orange County Women Lawyers Association is a strong affiliate of CWL.

As a judicial officer I continued my gender bias focus. I frequently lectured on the topic, served on the first State Bar Committee formed to investigate gender bias and cofounded the Orange County Bar's standing committee on the subject.

Does gender bias still exist in the legal profession? If so, how would you like to see CWL address it?

Gender bias exists, and it is serious. The real concern is not just how the bias affects women lawyers. The issue is how the bias permeates the decision-making process and results in decisions based on personal assumptions and gender stereotypes rather than evidence. And then we must remember gender is a two-sex word. Gender bias is the characterizing of women and men. If we perceive women as less credible witnesses then we see men as more believable. If mothers are more parentally nurturing than fathers are less so. CWL of course must maintain its focus on women lawyers, but as part of the ultimate goal of a gender bias free profession!

The point is we're fighting for an inclusive profession which treats everyone equally.

And one final point. Different obstacles face this generation of women lawyers. Employment per se and even advancement are not the barriers they once were. What is happening today is more and more women are "opting out" or choosing a "Mommy Track," essentially putting their careers on hold.

CWL must be ever vigilant that all lawyers—whether female or male—have the freedom to make career decisions based on their individual wishes and desires and not because of societal gender characterizations.

Audra's Note: I had the honor of serving with Justice Sonenshine on the State Bar Commission on Judicial Nominees Evaluation and have been fortunate to know her ever since. I often ask my interviewees for this column, "If someone were to describe you in one sentence, what would they say?" In this case, I know the answer: Justice Sheila Prell Sonenshine is a force of nature.

In fact, to quote an old Orange County Bar Journal article about her: "You see a tornado coming toward you at breakneck speed. No, it's a hurricane. On closer reflection, you realize it's a different natural phenomenon: Justice Sheila Sonenshine, this year's winner of the prestigious Franklin G. West award, in motion." The award is the Orange County Bar's highest honor for legal scholarship, professionalism, integrity and commitment to the legal community.

