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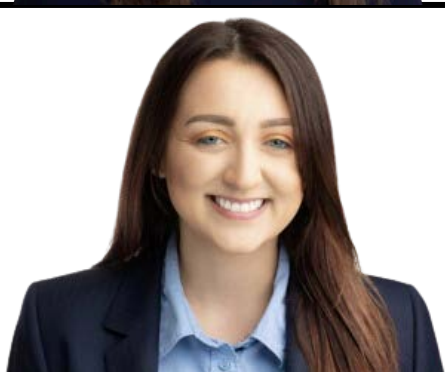
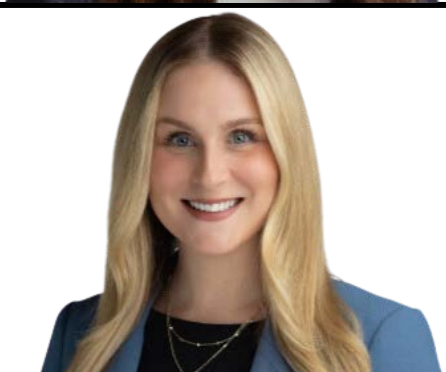
PAST - PRESENT - FUTURE



LEADERSHIP CLASS PROJECT



2024



WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION OF MICHIGAN

2024 LEADERSHIP CLASS PROJECT

Where we've been, where we are, and where we're going...



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THANK YOU!

2024 LEADERSHIP CLASS STATEMENT

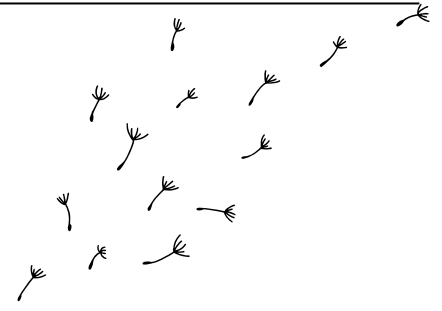
THE STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITY OF WOMEN LIES IN ITS REMARKABLE ABILITY TO FOSTER UNITY, EMPOWERMENT, AND RESPECT AMONG ITS MEMBERS. WOMEN'S COMMUNITIES SERVE AS A SANCTUARY WHERE INDIVIDUALS CAN SHARE EXPERIENCES AND HOPE, OFFER ADVICE, PROVIDE SUPPORT, AND BE HEARD FREE OF JUDGMENT. THE RESULTING NETWORK OF SOLIDARITY AND COLLECTIVE STRENGTH ENABLES WOMEN TO CHALLENGE SOCIETAL NORMS, ADVOCATE FOR DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY, AND DRIVE SOCIAL CHANGE. THROUGH COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT, WOMEN HAVE AMPLIFIED THEIR VOICES, NURTURED LEADERSHIP SKILLS, AND INSPIRED FUTURE GENERATIONS. THE WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION OF MICHIGAN AND THE PAST AND PRESENT WOMEN LAWYERS INCLUDED IN THIS PROJECT HAVE INSPIRED THE MEMBERS OF THIS YEAR'S WLAM LEADERSHIP CLASS—INDIVIDUALS IN THE FUTURE GENERATION OF WOMEN LAWYERS. THE RELATIONSHIPS FORMED WITHIN THE WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION OF MICHIGAN ARE A TESTAMENT TO THE ENDURING POWER OF COMPASSION, SHARED PURPOSE, LOVE, AND RESILIENCY, MAKING IT AN INVALUABLE FORCE IN THE JOURNEY TOWARD A MORE EQUITABLE LEGAL FIELD, MICHIGAN, AND WORLD.

With gratitude,

2024 Leadership Class



TIMELINE



1871 - Sarah Kilgor Wertman - First female attorney in Michigan

1919 - Women Lawyers Association of Michigan was founded

1923 - Grace G. Costavas Murphy - First African American female attorney in Michigan

1979 - Mary Coleman - First female Michigan Supreme Court Justice

1998 - Joan Mahoney - First female law school Dean

2014 - Judith E. Levy - First openly lesbian federal Judge in Michigan

2023 - Justice Kyra Harris Bolden - First African American female Michigan Supreme Court Justice

2023

According to the 2023 State Bar of Michigan Demographic Report, “the majority of Michigan attorneys are male (62.2%), but women are increasingly narrowing that gap. In the last 10 years, 51.8% of members were male compared to 47.9% being female.”

2024

Before 1976 the Michigan Supreme Court was made of all men. Today, women make up the majority with 4 out of 7 female Justices holding office. These women include Justice Kyra Harris Bolden, Justice Elizabeth Welch, Justice Megan Cavanaugh, and Justice Elizabeth Clement, who leads as Chief Justice.



PAST

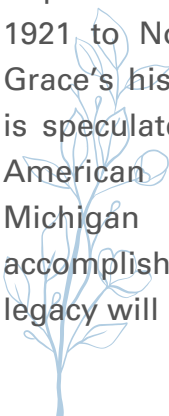
SARAH KILLGORE WERTMAN (1843-1935)



Sarah Wertman was the first woman to graduate from the University Of Michigan and first to be admitted to the Michigan bar. Born in 1843, she was raised in Jefferson Clinton County, Missouri. She was a teacher there before deciding to embark on her pioneering legal journey. Her father was an attorney in Missouri and encouraged her to follow in his footsteps. Sarah first enrolled at the Union College of Law in Chicago but transferred to the University of Michigan in 1870. Her graduation and bar admittance allows us to remember her as the first woman attorney in Michigan. Soon after making history, she grew sick and was labelled an invalid for a whole year. Later, in 1875, she got married to a fellow attorney and they moved to Indiana where they opened a joint practice. Mrs. Wertman specialized in real estate law and became a mother of three children. Wertman died in 1935, and her legacy will always be remembered.

GRACE G. COSTAVAS MURPHY (1892?- 1932)

Grace Murphy (Grayce W. Murphy) was the first African-American woman attorney in Michigan. She graduated from Detroit College of Law in 1923. She was also the first Black woman to be appointed to the Detroit Police Department, and she served from April 24, 1921 to November 18, 1923. Unfortunately, Grace's history is not well documented. She is speculated to have been the first African-American woman to practice before the Michigan Supreme Court. Today, her accomplishments are celebrated and her legacy will be cherished.



PAST



DOROTHY COMSTOCK RILEY
(1924-2004)



Dorothy Comstock Riley was the first woman to join the Michigan Court of Appeals. She was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1924. After graduating from Wayne State University Law School, she practiced on her own for six years. She married in 1967 and became a mother while still practicing law as an Assistant Wayne County Friend of the Court. In 1976, she became the first woman to serve on the Michigan Court of Appeals. In 1982, she ran for a seat on the Michigan Supreme Court but lost. Even so, she joined the Michigan Supreme Court appointed by the Governor because of a vacancy after the death of another Justice. In 1983, she was removed from the court. Still, she persisted in her goal to be on the Michigan Supreme Court and won the later election in 1985, becoming the first Hispanic woman to be elected to any state supreme court. Mrs. Riley thrived and achieved the great honor of becoming Chief Justice from 1987 to 1991. Mrs. Riley also was the founder and Honorary Chair of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society. She later retired in 1997 and died in 2004, but she continues to be remembered for her poise and tenacity.



PAST



CORNELIA KENNEDY
(1923-2014)



Cornelia Kennedy was born on August 4, 1923, in Detroit, Michigan. She graduated from the University of Michigan in 1945 and went on to earn her Juris Doctor from the University of Michigan Law School in 1947, where she was one of only two women in her class. In 1966, Cornelia was the first female judge in Michigan. In 1970, President Richard Nixon appointed Kennedy to the federal bench of the Eastern District of Michigan. She was the first woman to serve on this court and later became its Chief Judge, also the first woman to hold this position. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter nominated Kennedy to the Sixth Circuit. She served with distinction, handling numerous significant cases, and earning a reputation for her legal acumen and fairness. In 1979, she was also a founding member of the National Association of Women Judges. Cornelia Kennedy's legacy is marked by her trailblazing role as a female judge in Michigan and her contributions to the federal judiciary. Cornelia Kennedy passed away on May 12, 2014, leaving behind a lasting impact on the American legal system. She is remembered not only for her legal expertise, but also for her dedication to advancing the role of women in the legal field.



PRESENT

Emily Elmer is an alumni of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law and a member of the Wolverine Bar and the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan. She is an associate at Warner Norcross + Judd, practicing as a real estate litigation attorney who represents both commercial and residential clients in disputes involving property boundaries, zoning regulations, land use, and lease agreements.

"Be prepared and also be okay with not being in the spotlight for a while and do it gracefully. Be a good understudy. Until it's your time for that lead role, be a supportive and thorough understudy."

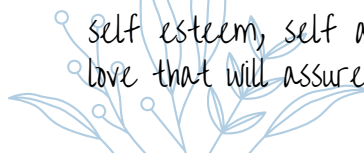
EMILY ELMER



VERONICA BELTRAN

Veronica Beltran is an alumni of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. She has built her experience within immigration and business law within a public interest scope. Veronica has worked for non-profits throughout her legal career and has been driven to serve those in need of immigration assistance and helping entrepreneurs with setting up their businesses. She currently serves as an Assistant Director of student Engagement and Culture at Wayne State University Law School.

"The tools and tips and tricks that I'm going to say are all based in self love, self assurance, self confidence, and self esteem . . . because there are other tools and tips and tricks that can help you advance as a law student or as an attorney, but sometimes . . . just to even take on opportunities you need to have a level of self awareness, a level of self esteem, self assurance, self confidence and self love that will assure you."



PRESENT

Paulina Kennedy graduated from the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. She practices plaintiff-side employment law advocacy through her work in the employment law practice group at Sommer Schwartz. She supports litigation involving state and federal law claims ranging from wage and hour disputes to sexual harassment, discrimination, whistleblowing and retaliation, and FMLA violations. Paulina is a member of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan and was recently named President of the Woman Lawyers Association of Michigan Wayne Region for 2024-2025.

PAULINA KENNEDY



"Confidence is key. New lawyers, of course, have a lot to learn in terms of how things really work in practice, and wherever you land each office and role is a little bit different. But you already have all the qualifications you need to be thorough and do the research and present the best solution for the client. So my advice would really just be to affirm to yourself that you were hired to have a voice and then use it."



Nina Lotarski is an alumni of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. She currently works as a Senior Associate Attorney at Aloia & Associates, P.C. She concentrates her practice on domestic relations, commercial litigation, and other general civil litigation matters. She provides pro bono legal services for the Junior League of Detroit. In addition, she is a committee member for the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan: the WLAMom Committee and the Gender Equity Committee.

"Two things that have helped me a lot in my practice have been trusting your gut and going your own path. Once you couch that with having the legal experience and education, your gut becomes that much stronger. There's a lot of things to balance that can distract you and get you off your game. Trust in who you are and trust your gut. Go down your own path. It's okay if you're a little goofy. It's okay that you're not this perfect cookie cutter, black jacket, black tie, white shirt attorney."

NINA LOTARSKI

PRESENT

Elyse Culberston is an alumni of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. She is currently an Associate Attorney at Jackson Lewis P.C. and specializes in Labor and Employment Law. Elyse is an active member of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan and serves on the executive board of the Women's Bar Association and the Oakland County region of WLAM. She also participates in several WLAM committees, including the WLAM Leadership Class Committee.

"[Do] not to be afraid to take chances on yourself and don't second guess yourself in the process."

ELYSE CULBERSON



Photo by: Emma Bircusel

During the 2024 WLAM Leadership Class Orientation at Warner Norcross + Judd, Honorable Mariam Bazzi and Honorable Teri Lynn Dennings share their experience, advice, and hope with the Class.



FUTURE



MECCA MUHAMMAD

Graduating Class: 2025
School: University of
Detroit Mercy School of
Law

"So often we as women tend to worry about being liked. Being liked is fickle. They can like you and treat you any kind of way. I think it's more important to be respected and that they respect your competency."



MARIANNA SEAL

Graduating Class: 2025
School: University of
Detroit Mercy School of
Law

"Women are the future. We are seeing more and more women entering the legal field and that is due to the resilience of women from the past, the present attorneys who continue to strive for excellence, and ambition of future women attorneys. I am so proud to be a part of such an amazing group of women."



ALEXIS AMY

Graduating Class: 2025
School: University of
Detroit Mercy School of
Law

"Belonging to a community and having positive relationships are really crucial to my personal and professional well-being. My experiences while pursuing law and interacting in groups, like the WLAM, has allowed me to know that I'm following the right path to achieve my goal of building a life full of learning, advocacy, and camaraderie."



FUTURE



LIBERTY TURNER

Graduating Class: 2025
School: Michigan State
University College of Law

"I think the inherent advocate in me and the crime junkie in me merged together and law school was the clear path to take."



ALEXIS FARMER

Graduating Class: 2026
School: University of
Detroit Mercy School of
Law

"The Democratic Presidential nominee is a woman lawyer. Lawyers can serve the local needs of their communities and also have a seat at the table at the highest office in our country. The future of law, and a woman's place in it, is limitless."



GENAVIEVE KOWALSKI

Graduating Class: 2026
School: Wayne State
University Law

"The way I like to see it is that we are all paving each other's futures: That every small step will assist the next future attorney that comes behind you. All of us are paving the path for women in the legal field by making room for ourselves now - we are no longer waiting on that space to be made. The next future generation of female attorneys will already have the space that we made, but they'll also make more space. Eventually, we'll be able to feel just as empowered as any male attorney."



FUTURE



CASSIE WECK WUN

Graduating Class: 2025
School: University of Detroit Mercy School of Law

"I do think it's important to address communication expectations and boundaries. And to me, no job would ever be worth sacrificing my own sense of self-worth or boundaries. My mother-in-law's famous phrase is 'Don't settle,' and I really take that to heart."



DIANA LAZAR

Graduating Class: 2026
School: University of Detroit Mercy School of Law

"Being able to build that network has been really helpful. You never know where you're going to end up and who you're going to meet. So it's nice to be able to have a wide array of people and know a wide array of people because it can open up a world of opportunity."



MEGAN RUMBLES

Graduating Class: 2026
School: Wayne State University Law

"I truly believe the way forward is together. By sharing our experiences, goals, and struggles, we not only bust the myth of isolation but also unlock the door to real collaboration. Together, we can turn our collective wisdom into meaningful action—and make the journey something we look forward to, one step at a time."



Please check out the WLAM Podcast series to
hear more about the present and future
attorneys showcased above!



Co-Chairs: Kirsten Silwanowicz & Alexandra Casperson;
WLAM Leadership Class Sponsors; Class Project
Participants: Emma Burcusel, for our lovely headshots;
and all others that helped make the podcast and the 2024
WLAM Leadership Class a reality!



Photo by: Emma Burcusel

