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**FOCUS: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

## **Women riding WAVE, Women Advocates for Enterprise, at Partridge law firm**

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Perhaps there will come a time in the not-too-distant future when organizations devoted to the advancement of women in the professional world will no longer be needed.

But right now, groups such as Women Advocates for Enterprise – or WAVE – at the Providence law firm of Partridge Snow & Hahn LLP provide an extra edge of support that can help women flourish in arenas, like the law, that have been dominated for centuries by men.

Ask Lauren F. Verni.

An attorney who specializes in creditor rights and bankruptcy law, Verni since mid-December has been chairwoman of WAVE. She now is in charge of the very group that helped her achieve success at Partridge Snow & Hahn.

“It’s been a tremendous opportunity for me to develop professionally,” she said of the mentoring she received from female colleagues at the law firm as part of WAVE.

“I’ve spoken on panels outside of the firm, which I may not have participated in had I not been mentored by such terrific women that were role models for me. [They] encouraged me to explore new things as a younger attorney, and really make myself more available to marketing and networking,” she told Providence Business News.

In addition to mentoring, Verni took advantage of in-house, WAVE-sponsored seminars on such issues as image-building and presentation skills. “A lot of those tools,” she said, “helped me prepare to present myself in an external arena.”

Rather than cite a specific example, Verni preferred to discuss the overall “global” way that WAVE helped her by, for instance, “enhancing my marketing skills, my client-development skills, my presentation skills,” she said, “and just building confidence as a female attorney.”

One of her mentors was fellow attorney Kathleen A. “Kathi” Ryan, who specializes in probate, trust and personal planning and who founded WAVE about four years ago. Ryan sees Verni’s progression from being a young, mentored attorney to chairwoman of WAVE as a clear manifestation of the maturing group’s success and the continued need for it.



PBN PHOTO/DAVID LEVESQUE

**STRENGTH IN NUMBERS:** Partridge Snow & Hahn attorneys Lauren F. Verni, left, and Kathleen A. Ryan discuss the Women Advocates for Enterprise (WAVE) program started by the law firm.

"What is so rewarding to me is to see that WAVE has become even more than what we anticipated when we first started this program," Ryan said. "We do have a lot of talented women attorneys at the firm and it's so nice to see them taking advantage of the opportunities we have presented to them."

Women working together and supporting each other were goals from the start.

Ryan founded WAVE "to make sure we had a program that would provide support for our women attorneys here at the firm," Ryan said, "and we wanted to provide them with educational opportunities, training, all the leadership opportunities and whatever other support we could offer through mentoring."

At the same time, beyond the in-house support and seminars, she said, it was important to include an external component to WAVE – to reach outside the law firm and work with female entrepreneurs in the community.

"We wanted to be a resource for women-owned and women-operated businesses," Ryan said. "We looked at ways we could provide educational opportunities and networking for women in business in the communities where we live and practice."

Some of the female business owners involved in WAVE are or have been clients of the firm, but others became involved through the kind of routine contacts any businessperson might make. WAVE would involve female business owners by, for instance, inviting them to upcoming events, such as educational seminars on legal and business issues or general networking without a legal focus.

Men are not necessarily excluded. "We do involve the men to some extent in some of our events, where that's appropriate," Ryan said.

The group also works with outside organizations, partnering with the state chapter of the American Heart Association, for instance, in the Go Red for Women day on Feb. 4 and, Verni said, will continue its partnership with Leading Women of Southeastern New England. For the heart association, WAVE will sponsor an invitation-only reception at the Statehouse on Feb. 3 for "the leading ladies of Rhode Island," she said.

The WAVE group comprises every female lawyer who works at the South Main Street firm, 14 women out of a total of 43 attorneys. "All of our women attorneys have been involved in the planning as well as participating in those events that we've sponsored," Ryan said. "We've been able to develop some very strong relationships."

Verni pointed out that WAVE is a key factor in recruiting women for Partridge Snow & Hahn. Before she was hired, WAVE was "one thing that piqued my interest and made me want to come to the firm and be a part of it," she said. "A lot of the younger women here are very excited about the program and any new initiatives that we develop, they're very involved in it. But it is a great professional development tool for all of the women at the firm, not just the younger women."

Often co-sponsoring events together, WAVE works closely with Women Count, a similar supportive organization for women who work at the Providence accounting firm of Lefkowitz, Garfinkel, Champi & DeRienzo P.C.

Women Count consists of six core members, but recently was augmented by the creation of an internal women's network comprising all 35 women who work at the 66-member firm, according to Renee Aloisio, director of internal operations. The group was formed to "support the women leaders at the firm," she said, "and to pave the way for the next generation of leaders."

Research and reports she has heard from others in the accounting profession indicate that a women's support group remains necessary today. "The research and the commentary indicate we do need this," Aloisio said. "We are reaching a point where we are making strong inroads and we need to continue the momentum we've built in this area." •