

Spokane attorney Robin Haynes is youngest ever to be named state bar association president

Witherspoon Kelley associate plans to promote diversity within industry

Kevin Blocker

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—Kevin Blocker

Robin Haynes, a 37-year-old attorney with Witherspoon Kelley, is the sixth woman to lead the Washington State Bar Association.

Spokane attorney Robin Haynes says she will vigorously strive to further develop programs the Washington State Bar Association has put in place in recent years to diversify the profession and to enhance service to the public.

The 37-year-old Haynes was recently named WSBA president, making her the youngest attorney ever elected to the position in the association's 127-year history. Her term begins Oct. 1.

"The legal field lacks diversity. It's probably one of the oldest and whitest professions," Haynes says.

Haynes is a principal attorney at Witherspoon Kelley, Spokane's oldest and largest law firm. She was selected this month by the WSBA's board of governors to lead the organization. Her official duties as WSBA president start next year. She becomes only the sixth woman to serve in that position.

Haynes has served as the WSBA's governor-at-large representing the state's approximately 7,000 new and young lawyers.

Before Haynes, current Washington state Supreme Court Judge Mary Fairhurst, who is a Gonzaga University School of Law graduate as is Haynes, had been the youngest attorney elected WSBA president. Fairhurst was 40 when she served in that role in 1997.

The American Bar Association found in a study conducted two years ago that 34 percent of attorneys in the U.S. were women. Among Fortune 500 companies, only 21 percent of legal counsel for those businesses were women. And of that 21 percent, 82 percent were white women.

As incoming WSBA president, Haynes says part of her duties will be to continue to work with the association in its efforts to diversify the legal profession across the state.

In 2012, the WSBA conducted a statewide demographic survey of its more than 35,000 members. Nearly 80 percent of attorneys in Washington were past the age of 40. Additionally, just 12 percent of WSBA members identified themselves as members of ethnic minority groups.

“The profession is changing,” said the WSBA in its study. “The business interests of attorneys, employers, and clients call for more diverse legal representation across the state.”

The WSBA is actively working to ensure a more racially diverse, continuing legal education faculty that better reflects its membership and the clients those members serve.

The state bar also is working to create more networking opportunities in partnership with minority bar organizations to connect racially diverse members to the larger membership.

On Haynes’ agenda is to also continue to help the WSBA ensure the professional success of new and younger attorneys. Becoming a lawyer has been a popular profession in recent years for those starting second careers, she says.

“The challenge for them is that they are coming out of law school with \$200,000 in student loan debt and have to charge exorbitant rates to pay their student loan bills,” she says.

“They charge so much they phase out the market—the moderate-means market—persons like teachers making 200 to 400 percent above the federal poverty level who do not qualify for free legal aid. In family law cases, we now have 80 percent of litigants going into court pro se,” she says.

“The problem is that the overwhelming majority of them don’t have any understanding of the law,” Haynes says.

She says the WSBA recognizes these challenges and is working to try to help debt-burdened attorneys make a living and to help cash-strapped consumers receive competent representation in court.

“The core mission of the WSBA is to protect the public, and I want to do my part to help continue in that effort,” she says.

Haynes attributes a big part of her rapid career rise to her former partners at Reed & Giesa, including her former boss, attorney D. Roger Reed, now at Lukins & Annis PS. That firm hired her during her second year of law school. She completed her law degree in 2006, graduating cum laude.

“I figured if I didn’t pass the bar exam, they might let me hang around at least another six months doing something to try again,” Haynes says, laughing.

Haynes passed the bar exam on her first attempt and spent the next five years working as an associate attorney before becoming that firm’s first woman partner. There, she handled all phases of commercial litigation, including in the areas of finance, banking, employment, receiverships, and commercial and residential real estate.

“Roger really espoused the importance of bar service and community involvement,” Haynes says. And it was during that time, she says, that she began to see her role in the legal field as something that had the potential to be much different from what she first envisioned.

She was going to leave Spokane for Seattle or Portland and start her career. Haynes’ family moved to Spokane from Connecticut when she was in her early teens. She graduated from University High School here, but says she frequently felt like an outsider.

At Reed & Giesa, however, she continued to become more involved in leadership and professional associations. She's currently a mentor with Gonzaga's School of Law, the Washington Defense Trial Association, and the Women's Leadership Circle of Planned Parenthood.

Haynes served as member of the board of directors of the Spokane AIDS Network from 2013 to 2014 and currently serves as a trustee for the Washington State Bar Foundation. She's also a member of Gonzaga University's law school advisory board.

"It seemed like I could make a bigger difference staying here in Spokane than going somewhere else," she says.

Haynes was hired at Witherspoon Kelley in September 2013. She is a principal in the employment litigation groups, working in class action defense, finance and banking, business startups and technology. The firm's represented clients include Providence Health & Services, Kaiser Aluminum Corp., and Cowles Co.

She says her standard hourly rate is \$230, nearly \$500 per hour less than a Seattle-area attorney with comparable experience charges.

Despite the fact that a light workweek for her is 60 hours, Haynes says she's adamant about carving out time for herself, which is often in the gym.

"I remember at first-year orientation at Gonzaga they told us, 'You will enter a field whose practitioners have among the highest alcoholism, drug abuse, and divorce rates among all professions.' That'll catch your attention."

Haynes, who says she's "all of 5-foot-1-ish" is proud of the fact she recently deadlifted 305 pounds in the weight room at her gym.

And the fact she was sideswiped by a reckless driver while running didn't stop her from returning to running after requiring medical treatment for her injuries.

"There's a lot of value in taking time for you. It's exciting to be a 37-year-old woman who can do pull-ups," Haynes says.

She says she's not quite sure of her long-term goals, but she adds, "When I retire, I would like to be alive when people don't assume that a woman in the court is the court reporter or that a person of color is the defendant."



- **Kevin Blocker**



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Reporter Kevin Blocker, a University of Colorado alum, is a rec league basketball addict. At age 47, he still sports a 32-inch vertical leap. He has three children, all of whom are hooked on hoops.

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