



A Place at the Table

Profile of incoming PBA President Sharon R. López

By Nancy H. Wilkes

Sharon R. López is a feminist in the inclusive sense of the term. She possesses resilience, self-awareness, a fundamental understanding that her worth is not defined by typical markers of success, and a keen eye for equality. From the time she was a young child participating in dinner-table discussions with her parents and other academics, discussing philosophy and economics, she understood the power of social justice. Now, as she prepares to become the 123rd, and the first Latina, president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, López vows to make sure the PBA has a place for everyone at the table.

López is the managing partner of Triquetra Law, a civil rights, employment and appellate advocacy-focused firm in Lancaster. She was co-chair of the PBA Membership Development Committee and co-chair of the Civil and Equal Rights Committee; served on the PBA Diversity Team; and is a member of the Commission on Women in the Profession, the GLBT Rights and Minority Bar committees and the Civil Litigation, Labor and Employment Law and Solo and Small Firm Practice sections.

“I was raised to read, write and discuss. I never felt I couldn’t talk,” López said. She is the daughter of a Mexican father and a Pennsylvania Dutch mother who met on a mission trip in Mexico City and raised their children in the Mennonite faith. They had two children and another on the way when they came to live in the states in 1965 during the civil rights movement. As graduate students, her parents focused family discussions on important human rights, and as López matured, she learned the importance of speaking up.





“My father couldn’t get a professional job when he first came to the states, even though he had a graduate degree. The only job he could get was washing eggs at a processing plant,” she said. Eventually, he earned his teaching certificate and became an adult education bilingual instructor in a local school district. He continued his education and before he died he had his master’s and was working for the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

By the time López was a teenager, she understood the barriers her father experienced and saw how hard work and determination make a difference, even when faced with what appear to be insurmountable barriers, and create change. López didn’t fully understand how to overcome barriers and promote real change until much later.

“All change is right when the cultural atmosphere is ready. You have to assess for readiness as opposed to mandating change,” López said.

That insight developed through several experiences. She went to Lancaster Mennonite High School in the 1970s, and it was a culture shock to go from her former public school to this small, homogenous school where everyone already knew each other.

“It was very challenging to fit in. I am bicultural, and I felt a lot more Hispanic than I thought I would. It felt very odd, but developing friends helped, and I focused on academics,” López said. She admits that she skipped a lot of school, but she still graduated and was college bound. “It influenced me as one who works to overcome discrimination and bias.”

She entered Eastern Mennonite College as a pre-med major because her father wanted her to become a doctor. “My father died my freshman year, and that was definitely a formative experience, a time of both academic and spiritual growth,” she said. Before he died, her family made one last pilgrimage to Mexico, and she told him



Sharon and her children, from left, Jody, Sharon, Von, son-in-law Jordan, Annisa and Sasha

she was not cut out for medicine. She knew she wanted to do something involving reading. “That was a turning point for me,” she said.

The following year, she changed roommates and began connecting to her Latina roots. She completed an intensive course at the Spanish Language Institute in Costa Rica and studied for a semester at the University of Costa Rica where she focused on sociology, psychology, Portuguese and ethics.

“My eyes were opened. You can never make assumptions of the impact of what you do. Only the person impacted can decide. The ethics of doing good are that it’s up to the person receiving the good to determine that,” she said.

López completed an externship with the Costa Rica Department of Agriculture in Cota Sur, a coastal region where peasant families moved into abandoned banana plantations as part of Costa Rica’s formal agrarian reform. She was a census gatherer. “I had to get to where they were, literally. I also assisted a nutritionist, working to

improve women’s nutrition intake. They needed more greens, so we started a communal garden, and we were teaching them. Another group was growing cash crops, palm hearts. The goals and values are very different, but we were meeting them where they were,” she said.

She came home with a renewed commitment to work for social change and graduated with degrees in sociology and Spanish with minors in peace and justice theology. The real prize was a surprise pregnancy in the middle of her senior year. She decided to have the baby on her own.

“I could not get a job as a professional as a single mother. I ended up on welfare, and I couldn’t wait to get off. But as a single mother, there was no way I could support my child and myself without it.” She finally got a job as a youth adviser at the YWCA for \$5,000 a year, and it offered free child care.

“[With] affordable child care, a single mother can do it. That saved me.” At the YWCA, she initiated a Community Conversation on Racism, diverse focus

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López completed the 2013 Atlantic City Half Marathon, one of numerous races she has entered.

groups from around Lancaster County that discussed racism, racial justice and culture change. She worked to stop the spread of AIDS before federal funding was available and volunteered as a rape aid counselor. While she enjoyed the work, she knew it wasn't what she wanted to do long term, and she missed being in school.

“My options were to get a Ph.D. in sociology or a master’s in social work and become a psychologist or therapist. That’s when I thought I could do a lot with a J.D. — policy work, advise people. At the time it made more financial sense,” López said. She had connected with her high school boyfriend, married him and had another child. Her husband supported her decision to attend law school. At first, she couldn’t find a program with evening classes, the only option for her as a working parent. Then, Widener University School of Law opened in Harrisburg, and she was accepted into the first class.

The Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN) had initiated a Martin Luther King Jr. summer internship program to promote inclusion. She applied, was accepted and was a member of the first class. “I worked there for seven years. It was like a warm bath. The work was exactly what I wanted to do. I helped female prison inmates, using a feminist focus to take care of what was needed. I took care of basic things like protecting due process rights,” she said.

López was handling a lot of protection from abuse and child-snatching cases, and when the Violence Against Women Act became law in 1994, the floodgates opened. That work connected her to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV) where she met a lot of feminist lawyers, and together they worked to implement protocols. When a vacancy opened at PCADV, she jumped. She was hired as senior attorney.

“I commented on legislation and testified. It was all about autonomy and readiness.



I was very strong in my positions, but I had a very black and white view of the world. I was disappointed the strong feminists weren't taking it far enough. Then I read *The Metaphysical Club*,” the 2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Louis Menand about a conversational philosophy club in 1872. The group included Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, Ralph Waldo Emerson and others who were credited with the rise of pragmatism as the dominant force in shaping American philosophy and thought.

“These men came back from the war, saw much death in the name of justice and concluded no justice-seeking effort is worth killing,” López said.

“You really need to know if the action you're taking is doing more harm than good. Know who you are before you're put in a position to decide who you are. Holmes was a middle-of-the-way kind. He saw that change too quickly would cause harm, and incremental change isn't necessarily a coward's way,” she said. This insight changed how López looked at policy and how she acted on a personal level, and she started listening a lot more, both emotionally and intellectually. At the same time, she started writing grant pro-

posals and training lawyers and advocates on how to better help PCADV clients.

“I went to Memphis and toured the Civil Rights Museum, and my perspective on where humanity went wrong shifted. In *The Road to Brown*, Charles Hamilton Houston, the architect of the legal road to *Brown v. Board of Education*, says that separate is not equal, and I got amazing insight into that movement. We need to be providing tools for change. The issue is autonomy. Legal services can't do that. I applied for a grant to train lawyers to do the work not provided by legal services. To impose good deeds without considering the ethical aspects is wrong,” López said.

She received a \$1.2 million grant during the Gov. Tom Ridge administration that funded a legal representation program. With sub-grants from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, she supervised a panel of members from the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges. Using information from the panel, she and Centre County Court of Common Pleas Judge Thomas King Kistler wrote a bench book for judges hearing domestic violence cases. It included information about child protection, gun and criminal conviction issues.

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López and her law partner Andrea Farney

“The more I was at the PCADV, the more I thought of what tools lawyers need to help our clients. I felt most proud of these two projects, and I readjusted my thinking. I saw beauty in balance and incremental progression,” López said.

The only thing that would beat that was to open her own law office. “I figured I could either stop complaining about lawyers not being prepared or do the work myself. I wrote a business plan in 2006,” she said. Soon after, she and two other lawyers from PCADV left to start Triquetra Law Firm. The triquetra is a Celtic symbol representing diversity, inclusion and beauty. One of the original partners left, and López and Andrea C. Farney now focus their practice on civil rights and discrimination protection.

Becoming a PBA officer was never in her set of goals, even though she has been an active and effective member. “I was always interested in focusing and organizing people to work on a common goal. I really like lawyers, and PBA lawyers are invested and interested in making the world a better place. I love working with people who work to make our profession better,” López said.

Her first leadership opportunity was in 2008 when Art Read, who was chair of the PBA Civil and Equal Rights Committee, asked her to prepare a resolution supporting the federal Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which was later adopted by the House of Delegates.

“That process went beyond what I was doing as a litigator. It was a ‘big cause’ opportunity, and the PBA provided me with the opportunity to connect with others and to see what role the law plays in advancing the common goal,” she said.

Opportunities kept rolling in. She was appointed to the Conference of County Bar Leaders as a diverse attorney, an experience that gave her insight on how to promote diversity. She joined the GLBT Rights and Minority Bar committees and was the first editor of the GLBT Committee’s “Open Court” newsletter. Past PBA President Francis X. O’Connor and Michael J. McDonald, co-chairs of the Membership Development Committee, tapped her for membership development. Her universal approach was to make all people feel they’re included. She served on the Judicial Evaluation Commission for the Lancaster Bar Association and served on the governor’s Judicial Selection Committee. All of these experiences led her to feel that she wanted to continue to develop her leadership in the PBA.

Widener University School of Law gave her a 2014 diversity award. PBA Executive Director Barry M. Simpson and Deputy Executive Director Francis J. O’Rourke heard her speech at the award ceremony

and asked if she would like to run for PBA president.

“It was a contested race, and I treated it like a campaign. I made my pitch and had an opportunity to explain my identified areas of concern. There was some concern I was too far left leaning. But the PBA isn’t run by the president. I’m just the head and can’t do anything without the support of the members,” she said.

López hasn’t served on the PBA House of Delegates or Board of Governors, the typical paths to the presidency. Her election “speaks volumes about the association’s commitment to diversity and inclusion,” she said.

As president, López isn’t looking to create dramatic, sweeping changes. She plans a new board project for membership enhancement and has assembled a blue ribbon panel to focus on millennials, mothers and minorities. “We want to develop new strategies to bring those who feel marginalized back into the fold: Millennials, for obvious reasons. Mothers, because 50 percent of law school students are women. We need to provide more responsive support. And minorities, who don’t fit into the old, white, male club and how that affects their sense of belonging. We’ll come up with ideas, and the officers and executive team will turn it into action,” López said.

She sees her PBA work as opportunities to work for social justice issues. Her credo, “True diversity and inclusion invite all the well-reasoned opinions to the table,” continues to guide her. “As long as we keep the dialogue going and respect each other, the social change ball will move forward.”

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Portrait photographs by Paul Jacobs of Paul Jacobs Photography,
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60 Seconds with Sharon



Sharon López lives in Philadelphia. Her firm, Triquetra Law, is in Lancaster. She has two sons and two daughters, ages 21 to 31.

1. What three words describe you? Feminist, mother, passionate
2. What keeps you awake at night? My kids, my clients, my schedule
3. What gets you going in the morning? Running, work, Facebook
4. What do you like to do when you aren’t working? I love dancing, any kind, ballroom

especially. I love jazz. I love art, especially Expressionist, modern art. I enjoy socializing and hanging out with people. Probably most of all, I love being with my companion, cooking, watching movies, doing mundane things. His name is Alan Gross.

5. How do you recharge? For work, I have lunch with my law partner and best friend, Andrea Farney. At home, I recharge by cooking. I love to cook, especially when my kids are here. I love when I’m in the kitchen cooking and can hear them in the living room, teasing each other, laughing, hearing that sound of family. My specialties are Mexican foods, especially the celebratory foods, and I like cooking new things and trying new recipes. I love menu planning and scheduling. That gives it an anticipatory and fun aspect, to look forward to cooking meals for people I love.
6. What book was an early influence on your social justice sensibilities? *Lord of the Flies*. It really struck me how people, given the right circumstances, can do anything, how we can hurt one another in the name of justice. That had a lasting impact on my sense of justice and humanity.
7. What advice would you give to a new law school graduate? Network. Networking is so important. You can network by doing good deeds, working for social justice or a charity.