

MICHIGAN Lawyers Weekly

A sidebar with... Michelle Harrell and Kaitlin Brown

By Kelly Caplan

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Michelle C. Harrell and Kaitlin A. Brown have been named co-chairs of Maddin Hauser Roth & Heller's new "Success through Empowerment and Engagement Committee," which will focus on promoting diversity and inclusion at the firm.



Harrell

The SEE Committee's mission includes working to maintain and enhance an environment and culture where attorneys from diverse backgrounds can "succeed, achieve and lead" both within the firm and out in the community. Promoting business and personal development — through business connections and networking activities — is another stated goal.

Steven D. Sallen, president and CEO of Maddin Hauser, said, "As part of our firm's long-standing efforts to support societal equity and fairness, we remain committed to increasing and honoring the diversity of our attorneys and other employees, and supporting initiatives for inclusion in the legal community and in society. The formation and activities of our SEE Committee are an action step forward towards honoring our commitment."

Harrell and Brown shared with *Michigan Lawyers Weekly* how the committee came to be and the future of D&I at the firm.

Tell me about the SEE initiative. How did it go from idea to inception?

MH: The SEE Committee grew organically out of the firm's evolution, its increasing number of women attorneys, and the role of women in management at the firm. The firm is and has been committed to promoting the success and development of its women attorneys and ensuring that they receive opportunities and recognition for their achievements. The SEE initiative and resulting SEE Committee was formed through a series of conversations in 2019 between us about the unique challenges facing women attorneys, their unique paths, common struggles and ideas for ways to promote and



Brown

develop women attorneys through common effort, education and collaboration.

KB: After speaking to Michelle about how significantly her leadership on the Executive Committee impacted me, we discussed the possibility of launching a committee to support the advancement of women at our firm. I researched efforts by other women groups at law firms and spoke to several of their leaders about how to build a successful program. From the ideas generated in those discussions, we drafted a mission statement for the committee, which was originally called the Women Attorneys Success Committee. We considered it the first, small, meaningful step, knowing that there could be far more to tackle in terms of broader scope of diversity and expanded application to staff. We outlined major goals and asked for a reasonable budget that would allow for a networking event in the community. Consistent with its progressive support of women and other diverse groups, Maddin Hauser's firm management approved and fully supported the new committee and its mission.

MH: Our first meeting of women attorneys was held in the fall of 2019, pre-COVID, and consisted of an open, enthusiastic, round table discussion of our proposed mission, brainstorming specific actions we could take to accomplish the larger goals, and tracking the hands being thrown in the air to volunteer for moving each initiative forward. At each meeting since, we touched on our mission to track progress on our shared goals, but also to connect, share and support each other.

How did COVID and the events of 2020 affect the committee's ongoing work?

KB: During the COVID shutdown, our meetings served as a way to stay connected and to share our latest struggles and successes. We shared discoveries with technology, including a little humor with some virtual filters that made us look far fancier than we felt during — let's be honest — our days of struggling to survive a pandemic, long hours of video conferences, and constantly learning new laws, orders — and words like quarantine, isolation, and social distancing. We also connected with each others' kids, whose knocks on doors and singing in other rooms were warmly welcomed.

MH: In June 2020, in response to certain national crises and events, the firm publicly affirmed its commitment to support and promote social justice and fairness. The women's committee was already well received at the firm, and we broadened our mission to promote overall success and diversity, including recruiting and hiring, of additional diverse groups to support the firm's public commitment to action.

KB: After it was clear that the firm leadership and attorneys were in support of a committee with a more expanded purpose of diversity, the women's committee selected a new name — "Success through Empowerment and Engagement" or SEE. This name now captures the spirit not only of the women's group but also the broader diversity committee. The SEE Committee At-Large became farther-reaching and all firm attorneys were invited to join. The SEE Committee Women group continues as a separate committee to support and promote the firm's women attorneys. We are extremely pleased and excited about the future for the SEE Committee-at-Large and SEE Committee Women.

What sort of outreach/education are you doing?

MH: Our committee has prompted action and outreach both internally within the firm and externally, reaching out to our community. Internally, we have hosted programs that are open to all employees at our firm to promote personal and career satisfaction, on topics such as financial health and wealth and estate planning. We also recently hosted a virtual networking event with a personal

cooking class (Cooking was optional!) to promote connections among our networks and women leaders in our community.

KB: Perhaps most importantly, we have created a safe space for our women attorneys to share their struggles during the pandemic and support each other. This has led to our women attorneys being better advocates for each other, sharing resources, and also raising awareness of experiences and needs, both among each other and our colleagues.

MH: Our committee has dived into the unique issues facing women attorneys, proposed firm policies, and exchanged ideas to support each other's successes. We expect to have even greater outreach once the COVID restrictions are lifted.

What steps are you taking to get buy-in from your colleagues?

KB: We started with a small step of inviting women. Attendance was not mandatory, but all of the women attorneys at our firm have participated. From that step, we have invited others to join us in our pursuit of not only the success and empowerment of our women attorneys but the greater mission of firm diversity, social justice and fairness.

MH: We have received more buy-in each time we take action and conduct outreach. The key is action and not just "thoughts, prayers and hopes" because we are the product of what we do, not what we just think or say we will do.

What long- and short-term goals have you set?

MH: Our goal is to enhance and maintain a law firm culture that supports, attracts and retains diverse attorneys. The specific goals range from recruitment to retention and advancement within our firm.

KB: We also want to support our attorneys in being successful leaders both within our firm and in the community. Our programming is intended to provide resources and connections for developing our attorneys, both personally and professionally.

How will this committee impact your recruiting and retention efforts?

MH: We are developing new methods and contacts to expand our networks to reach a more diverse body of applicants, and taking actions to demonstrate why these diverse applicants should be interested in connecting with and joining us.

KB: Our firm has always been a place for attorneys from all backgrounds to succeed. Our SEE Committee members are finding ways to share that message, for example by seeking out events where we can meet people outside of our current networks. We will be intentional about seeking and selecting top talent that contributes to the success of our business and strength of our culture.

There are so many outside resources for D&I now. Have you found any particularly helpful? Are you collaborating or working with D&I leaders from other firms, too?

KB: As Chair of the OCBA's Diversity and Inclusion Committee, I have connected with and learned from many professionals who have contributed to the conversation by presenting at those committee meetings. Darlene King from Michigan Diversity Council has led many local organizations through this kind of process, and she shared those strategies with us in 2019. Many of our firm's

attorneys attended the event, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion: In Action, which Maddin Hauser sponsored.

MH: That event was a significant launching point, and much was learned from other firms by coordinating and attending panel discussions hosted by the OCBA Diversity & Inclusion Committee, and from co-hosting with *Michigan Lawyers Weekly* and diversity leaders from local firms. We have much to learn from each other and recognize that we are not alone in this. Firms are at different points in their diversity and inclusion journey, but the focus is to keep stepping forward together.

Will this initiative eventually encompass staff, too?

MH: The current mission focuses on our women attorneys. Expanding the specific mission to include staff is another step that we see as a possibility on the horizon.

KB: Although the committee is comprised of only women attorneys, we are inviting all employees to attend our educational programming events to provide value to everyone.