



The Women's White Collar Defense Association — Women Making a Difference in the White Collar Defense Bar

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In 1999, both of the co-founders of the Women's White Collar Defense Association ("WWCDA"), Karen Popp and Beth Wilkinson, had recently left government service. Popp had been Associate White House Counsel to President Clinton and before that she was in the Office of Legal Counsel at the U.S. Department of Justice and also had served as Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of New York. Wilkinson had been an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of New York, and later was one of the lead prosecutors in the Oklahoma City bombing cases. Upon leaving government, the two joined their respective law firms as partners, wanting to be White Collar defense attorneys for corporate America. Popp went to Sidley Austin LLP and Wilkinson went to Latham & Watkins.

In looking back on her early days in private practice as a partner, Popp (who leads Sidley's White Collar Group and is the Global Chair of WWCDA) reflects that "when Beth and I left government, we noticed that the vast majority of the white collar defense bar were men. This was so different from our experience in the government. Attorney General Janet Reno and Deputy Attorney General Jamie Gorelick, the first women to hold these posts, led the Department of Justice. Mary Jo White, Beryl Howell, Valerie Caproni, Leslie Caldwell, Loretta Lynch, Kirby Heller and other women were part of leadership in the Eastern District of New York. Beth and I thought that women working together for and with each other could create a powerful force in the white collar bar just as it had in the government."

Popp and Wilkinson, close friends, attended the 1999 ABA White Collar Conference together. There were hundreds of men in attendance and only a few women. Virtually none of the panels at the conference had any women speakers. After returning from the conference, they discussed their

idea of forming a women's white collar defense group with the few other women practicing in D.C. and New York. Those talks led to the launch of the Washington D.C. chapter of the WWCD in late 1999, with a lunch of a mere 10 attendees, but with Attorney General Reno as the guest speaker. The group was able to discuss with General Reno certain aspects of the then recently released Memorandum from Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder on "Federal Prosecutions of Corporations," including the waiver of the attorney-client and attorney work product privileges. The lunch was a huge success and extremely valuable for the attendees. Soon thereafter, chapters were launched in New York and Boston. The group continued to grow as the years went by, launching chapters throughout the United States and beyond.

The goals of the WWCD, then, as now, are to:

- Promote diversity in the legal profession and in the legal fields of criminal, civil, regulatory, and administrative enforcement, as well as internal investigations, compliance and ethics.
- Provide networking and business development opportunities for its members and participants in their local markets, as well as nationally and internationally.
- Develop educational programming focused on the legal fields of criminal, civil, regulatory, and administrative enforcement, as well as internal investigations, compliance and ethics.
- Facilitate collaboration and communication among its members and participants.
- Develop resources to assist our members and participants.

Longtime WWCD member Joan McPhee, a former Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York from 1986-1990, explains the commitment she and other WWCD members have to these goals: "I always thought that achieving my own success included helping others. The WWCD is a perfect embodiment of that philosophy – it focuses on women helping women, mentoring younger lawyers, and integrating and strengthening the bar."

By 2018, WWCD had over 1,400 members in 30 chapters around the world, with five more chapters being launched in the near future. WWCD expects to have chapters on most continents by summer. The local chapters have various events throughout the year which offer substantive, high-quality programs and the opportunity for those attending to not only be further informed on important and timely issues, but also to meet or renew their acquaintances with prosecutors and regulators, make new contacts in the women's white collar bar, and spend time with friends. Some of the guest speakers for chapter events have included a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, the Chair of the SEC, senior officials at the U.S. Department of Justice, the General Counsel of the F.B.I., U.S. Attorneys, the General Counsel of the U.S. Congress, members of the media, including a Pulitzer

Prize winner, general counsel of corporations, and a World Bank official. WWCDA also maintains a robust member listserv for making referrals and for questions about substantive and practical questions.

Since 2002, WWCDA's signature event has been the annual meeting, which is always held the day before and in the same city as the ABA White Collar Conference. The first year consisted of a group of 16 women from Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Miami who met at the Delano in South Beach, Florida. In those early days, the annual gathering was commonly referred to as "Spa Day."

The event was mainly social, held at a high end boutique hotel (with a spa) and was intended to be a parallel but decidedly women-oriented networking event similar to the golf-outings that the men attending the ABA White Collar Conference held the day before the Conference began.

Today, the annual event is attended by hundreds of women from around the world, filling a hotel ballroom each year to engage in powerful learning and networking experiences. The meeting offers structured business development opportunities for WWCDA members to become acquainted with other members, to whom they can refer cases and investigations and work together as well. The conference lasts a day and a half and also includes a session to discuss the affairs of the WWCDA and talks from influential legal industry leaders. At the February 2018 event, the Honorable Beryl Howell, the Chief Judge for the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, was the keynote dinner speaker, Kathy Ruemmler, former White House Counsel and member of the NCAA Commission on College Basketball, was the breakfast speaker, and a consultant conducted a two hour training session on practice development tips.

The growth of WWCDA has coincided with an explosion of work in firms in white collar matters. As corporate scandals became more common in the late 1990s into the turn of the century, law firms began to recognize that white collar defense work and government investigations were lucrative practice areas. As government investigations and prosecutions increased against Corporate America, there was more demand for white collar lawyers. Some of the highly capable former prosecutors left government to go into private practice and many were women. Other highly capable women moving into private practice had worked for public defenders' offices. And, graduating law students began identifying white collar defense as one of the top practice areas.

WWCDA's contribution to advancing the careers of women in the white collar bar and helping women demonstrate, through their representation of their clients, that they, too, can be first chair trial counsel in high-profile cases is incalculable and undeniable. The vision that led to WWCDA's contributions and its successes as an organization in achieving its goals is explained by member Wendy Wysong, former Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of Commerce and now

partner at Clifford Chance, who said “by giving vocal credit to each other, women can counteract being drowned out or not receiving credit from male colleagues. The empowerment and business referral objectives of the WWCDCA help to ensure that women lawyers advocate for each other and for their clients and are present in and controlling the room in the cases that matter most for their clients.”

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Lea Courington is a member of the Women's White Collar Defense Association.

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