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New Allegheny County bar chief Heilman relies on martial arts to keep cool
Aiming to promote diversity within the association

By Joyce Gannon / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Though she describes herself as zealous when representing clients, Nancy Heilman doesn't fight with opposing attorneys.

Nor does she become upset with aggressive drivers along Route 28 during the long commutes between her home in Armstrong County east of Sarver and her Downtown office at the law firm Cohen & Grigsby.

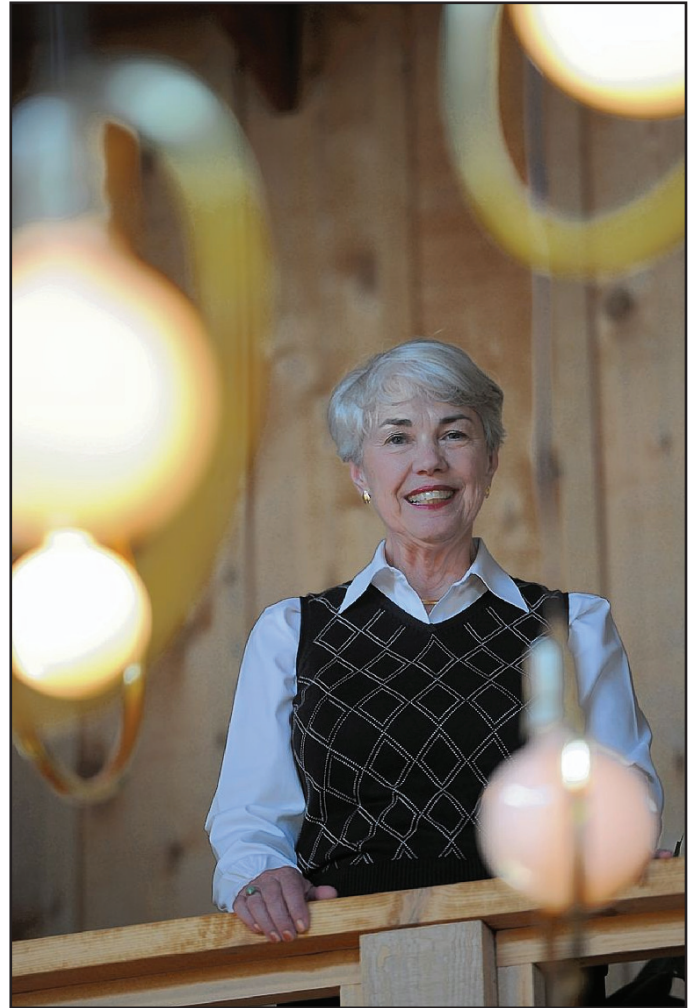
She credits her calm demeanor to nearly two decades of practicing traditional "Moo Doe" martial arts, in which she holds a fourth-degree black belt.

"It's changed my thinking," said the 71-year-old who will take over as president of the Allegheny County Bar Association on July 1. "I'm pretty composed, and that's due to the training. The focus [is] on maintaining internal physical strength and developing the mind through meditation."

Since taking up the practice at the suggestion of her son, Ms. Heilman has improved her concentration, become more productive, and rarely experiences "the 3 p.m. slump when you have to go get a cup of coffee."

In her law practice, in which she focuses on alternative dispute resolution, mediation and employment issues, the mental focus derived from Moo Doe has helped her cope with stress and anxiety.

"As lawyers, we have this aggression, and sometimes it's negative and can make you anxious," she said. "Throughout my career, since I was a judicial



Heilman credits her calm demeanor to traditional martial arts.

law clerk, I've been involved with the American Inns of the Court, which promotes civility, professionalism and ethics. And when lawyers can be civil and professional, that's better for clients."

Not that she expects much dissension among the 6,600 members of the bar association as she steps up to lead the organization after a year's tenure as president-elect.

“We are fortunate in our bar compared with other areas, where the lawyers can be very militant. Ours is overall very collegial,” she said.

As president for the next 12 months, Ms. Heilman wants to do more to promote the bar’s affinity groups, including the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) Rights Committee, the Hispanic Attorneys Committee, the Asian Attorneys Committee, and the Homer S. Brown Division for African-American lawyers. In addition, she wants to launch a group focused on disabilities.

Another initiative on her agenda is Back to the Bar -- a program for attorneys who have been out of the workforce and are considering returning to the practice of law. The six-session course includes refresher classes in topics such as legal writing and electronic discovery, resume workshops, mock interviews and networking opportunities.

“What initially comes to mind are mothers who left to raise children and want to come back,” said Ms. Heilman. “But interestingly enough, our first applicant is a man.”

She could probably teach some of the sessions herself, having returned to college and earned a law degree after working as a nurse and raising five children.

The native of Ardmore, Pa., a Philadelphia suburb, was offered a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania when she graduated from high school, but the school didn’t have housing available on its Philadelphia campus and it was an era when “young women didn’t go and get apartments by themselves,” she said.

Money was tight in her family of seven siblings, so she enrolled in the Bryn Mawr Hospital School of Nursing, earned a nursing diploma and worked at hospitals until her first child was born. She landed in Pittsburgh in 1969 and settled in

Point Breeze until 1975 when she and her husband “took a cornfield and built a house” on property located near her husband’s extended family in Sarver. Around that time she also enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh as an undergraduate English major and began decades of traveling 80 miles round-trip between her rural home and the city.

After completing her bachelor’s degree in 1979, Ms. Heilman waited a few years until her youngest son was in high school to obtain her law degree in 1987.

She worked as a judicial clerk for several federal judges before joining Cohen & Grigsby in 1990. In 2010, she resigned from the firm’s partnership and since then has been of counsel, which allows her to set her own schedule -- and commute in non-rush hours.

“Route 28 had something to do with retiring,” said the grandmother of 14. “My current car has 223,000 miles on it.”

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