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Corboy & Demetrio lawyer to lead WBAI

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When Michelle M. Kohut takes the reins of the state's largest women's bar group next month, she will face what many of its members also confront — balancing motherhood with the demands of a legal career.

Kohut's first child is due one week before she's installed as president of the 700-member Women's Bar Association of Illinois on June 13.

"The timing is not the best, but you know, it's all good stuff," she said.

Kohut, 38, works as an associate at Corboy & Demetrio, where she practices personal-injury law.

Her goal for her term is to expand WBAI's membership beyond the Chicago metro area.

"Our membership is concentrated and most of our activities are concentrated in Chicago and Cook County," Kohut said.

If the group can grow its membership outside the Chicago area, it will help lawyers expand their network, strengthen the organization and advance its original purpose of being a statewide bar group, Kohut said.

With a term theme of "Empowerment through Networking," Kohut wants WBAI to host various events around the state to drum up interest and membership.

Networking, she said, can help keep women in the profession.

"More than half of law

students are female, but they're not staying in the legal profession nor are they advancing in the legal profession at the same rate as men," Kohut said.

Kohut grew up in Milwaukee, the second oldest of four children. Her father died when she was 8, so she learned early in life about the "tenacity of being an independent woman" from her mother and grandmother, she said.

After graduating from Loyola University in 1996, Kohut enrolled in a program at Loyola to become a paralegal. After completing it in 1997, she was hired at Cooney & Conway.

"She was down to earth, and a great collector of people, facts, information," said Katharine Crane Byrne, an attorney at Cooney & Conway who relied on Kohut on multiple occasions.

"There are people who are sowers and people who are gatherers and she is a gatherer. She takes her common sense and her intelligence and she is able to really quickly sum up accurately any situation."

One day, a partner at Cooney & Conway approached Kohut and asked, "You do what an attorney does. Why don't you go to law school?"

"I basically responded, 'You're right. Why don't I?' And that's when I decided to enroll" at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Kohut said.

In 1998, she started attending law school at night and continued working for Cooney &



Michelle M. Kohut

Conway. When she graduated in 2002, she clerked for Cook County Circuit Judge William D. Maddux before being hired at Corboy & Demetrio about two years later.

The late Phillip H. Corboy encouraged Kohut to get more involved with the leadership of the WBAI.

"What's the point of being involved unless you want to be a leader?" said Kohut, who previously served as president of Women Everywhere: Partners in Service Project Inc.

"I'm not one of those people who just wants to follow the whole time. ... I see things I want to get done, things I want to accomplish for this organization."

Kohut plans to meet with the WBAI Membership Committee in the coming weeks to plan the group's upcoming events

downstate.

"It's something the women's bar has thought about for a while, but wasn't really sure how to act upon it," said Deane B. Brown, a partner at Beermann, Pritikin, Mirabelli, Swerdlove LLP, who served as WBAI president for the 2011-2012 term.

"I think it's great (Kohut) has made contacts throughout the state. I know she has people on board in various cities throughout Illinois, so they can act as point people."

If there is anyone who can juggle new motherhood, a bar group presidency and a full-time job, it's Kohut, said Adria East Mossing, a partner at Mossing & Navarre LLC, who sits on the Membership Committee.

"Here she is, it's her year as president and she's a brand new mom," Mossing said. "Yeah, there's going to be some bumpy times, but it's totally doable. ... She's going to do a great job of it."

If Kohut ever doubts that, she can seek advice from her predecessor, Karina Zabicki DeHayes, who led the organization last year while pregnant.

DeHayes — a partner at Tabet, DiVito & Rothstein LLC — said Kohut should still seize opportunities that come her way as WBAI president, despite the constraints on her time.

"With the help of a strong board, such as we have now," DeHayes said via e-mail, "she will find that she is able to say, 'yes,' more often than not."