

Read an interview with Lisa Sperow, 2019's Outstanding Woman Lawyer, who helps empower women

Lisa Sperow —2019 Outstanding Women Lawyer Award

In 2012, the Women Lawyers Association created the Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award to honor a female attorney in San Luis Obispo County promoting the advancement of women within our community. The Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award known as the OWL Award is presented annually, in March, in honor of Women's History Month. Two years later, we created the Rising Star Award allowing us to also recognize younger lawyers, having practiced seven years or less, but who are no less in their actions in promoting women.

Both Awards honor our mission statement, which is promoting the advancement of women. Yet, this task can play out in a variety of different ways. The first two recipients of the OWL Award, Angie King and Jacqueline Frederick, and the first recipient of the Rising Star Award, Janet Wallace were all honored for their involvements in organizations that work tirelessly to advance women. While other recipients, such as Alicia Valdes Wright were honored for her implementation of the, Incarcerated Women Legal Education Project. Whereas recipient Jennifer Alton was honored for her efforts mentoring female students working towards careers in the law, and Jan Marx for her leadership roles. Yet, the common thread for these recipients of the OWL Award is that each contributed to ensure that women were gifted the benefit of continuing to advance be it in the legal or San Luis Obispo community in general.

This March, we presented Lisa Sperow with the Outstanding Women Lawyer Award for her half dozen year service, as the Chair of our Scholarship Committee, fundraising and distributing scholarships to local female residents in law school. As well as for her leadership as the Executive Director of the Cal Poly Low Income Taxpayer Clinic. She accepted graciously and shared some of her thoughts.

What motivates you?

I'm motivated by my children and making this world a better place for them.

How and why did you come to accept the role as the Executive Director of the Cal Poly Low Income Taxpayer Clinic?

I accepted the role in the middle of the quarter when the current Director quit unexpectedly. I did not view myself as a tax lawyer and only expected to be in the position to see the current students through the quarter. Once in the clinic, however, I realized that it was a true opportunity to serve the community by relieving people of tax injustices and liabilities. I had always envisioned myself doing some sort of public interest law and was surprised to learn the amount of social justice and policy reform that is accomplished through low income taxpayer clinics.

What do you find enjoyable about being an educator?

I enjoy the opportunity to work closely with my students to learn from them as well as to educate them. As a professor, I am always learning new things which keeps life interesting.

What are some of the challenges you face in some of your role?

My least favorite part of teaching is the grading and focus on grades that many students have. My goal is to expand their world view and critical thinking skills while some of them seem more concerned about how to get an A in the class.

Tell us about your role as Chair of the Scholarship Awards Committee (2014-Present) for WLA.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to help current law students by recognizing them with this honor and award amount. I enjoy reading their applications and learning about all of the amazing things they are doing. I am appalled at the current cost of law school and view the WLA scholarship program as a way to help alleviate some of the costs these outstanding students are facing as well as letting them know that the work they are doing is appreciated and recognized. The hardest part is we are limited in how many awards we can give each year and there are always so many deserving students I wish we could recognize as well.

Who inspires you and why?

I am inspired by so many people. My father has always been a strong supporter and guide for me in making life choices. Former Taxpayer Advocate Nina Olsen is an inspiration as someone who has fought hard for a more equitable tax system. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her commitment to speaking up for justice is also an inspiration.

What guidance might you give to the future generation of women lawyers?

Work hard, don't be easily offended or deterred and follow your heart; it will ultimately lead you in the right direction.
