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Boston College Law School

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3/31/09--The Boston College Women's Law Center named Joan Lukey '74, "Woman of the Year" at its annual reception on March 19. Lukey, a partner in the litigation department at Ropes & Gray, is president-elect of the American College of Trial Lawyers, the first woman to hold that position.

Lukey used her keynote address to offer advice to the fifty female law students in attendance. "I'm going to tell you some things I wish someone had told me when I started practicing law thirty-four years ago," she said.

She first applauded the progress BC Law has made in closing the gender gap, noting that she was one of only twenty women in her graduating class of more than two hundred students. "There are so many wonderful women at the law school now. We are heading in the right direction," she said. "But there are still areas where progress needs to be made," singling out in particular the lingering gender imbalance on the federal bench in the Commonwealth.

Lukey, whose daughter was in attendance, next addressed the omnipresent issue of balancing work and family. She argued that, while men too struggle to balance their careers with family life, women still shoulder most of the burden of childcare. But most women wouldn't want it any other way, she added. "We choose to be the primary parent. We are good at nurturing," she said. "But none of that means you can't succeed in the law. It can be done, but not without sacrifices."

Her next piece of advice was an intimidating one - "it is time to start formulating the plan for the rest of your career." Lukey spoke from personal experience. Coming out of law school, she knew she wanted to be in the courtroom, but was clueless about the various sub-specialties of trial lawyering. As a result, her superiors picked a specialty for her: employment law. After some initial success in that field, Lukey said she quickly became "typecasted" as an employment litigator. Because of this initial misstep, Lukey says it took "it took fifteen years before I found myself getting called on for the kinds of cases I really wanted to be trying."

Lukey advised women to time beginning a family so as to minimize interference with their careers, and to take full advantage of new technology that makes working from home more feasible than ever before. She also emphasized the importance of finding a supportive spouse. When Lukey became the primary breadwinner in her marriage, her husband "thought it was fabulous and supported it," she said. "But none of that means you can't succeed in the law. It can be done, but not without sacrifices."

Despite her many successes, Lukey said her career feels incomplete because she has always worked in the private sector. She said she recently entertained offers to transition into public interest work, but couldn't justify a huge pay cut at a time when she was putting her daughter through school. She advised aspiring lawyers to be more "agile and light on your feet" than she had been. "Try to put yourself in a position where you can say yes to the things you really want to do," she said.

Lukey also spoke to the importance of maintaining relationships, both personal and professional. After making a high-profile move from Wilmer Hale to Ropes & Gray last year, Lukey said she received e-mails from old classmates she hadn't seen in decades, and was
saddened to have lost touch with so many once-close friends. "There come times in our lives, both personally and professionally, when we need all the supportive help we can get," she said.

Many in the audience described themselves as moved by Lukey’s speech. "Joan was a fantastic orator. I was a bit in awe of her in that respect," said Kelli Powell, Law '11.

"It is always really great to hear from someone who has lots of experience. And in her case, achievement as well, which added even more weight to her advice," Powell added.

Lukey graduated cum laude from Boston College Law School in 1974. She was the Editor of the Environmental Affairs Law Review, a member of the National Moot Court Championship Team, and the first woman selected as Best Oral Advocate at National Moot Court Competition.

The Women's Law Center (WLC) provides the law school community with programs and events concerning women in law and society. In addition, the WLC serves as a forum for feminist political activism and as a resource for women entering the legal profession.

By Jan Wolfe '11