

## Former NYC Bar President Looks At Tenure, Legal Advocacy

By Anna Sanders

*Law360 (June 5, 2024, 1:24 PM EDT)* -- When Jenner & Block LLP partner Susan Kohlmann became president of the New York City Bar Association in May 2022, the vibes were off.

Taking the reins just two years into the coronavirus pandemic, Kohlmann wanted to breathe life back into the institution by ensuring the bar remained a place where attorneys could engage in legal advocacy and social discourse even as remote work reshaped the practice of law and the city and country became increasingly divided.

"Particularly in this moment where people are so polarized about so many things, I was trying to create a vibe and a place where one could essentially speak freely and openly and still disagree in a way that we seem to have lost our ability to do," Kohlmann told Law360 Pulse.

Kohlmann served two one-year terms as bar president. Last month, the bar association elected Muhammad U. Faridi, a partner at Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler LLP, as its president — the first Muslim American to hold the position.

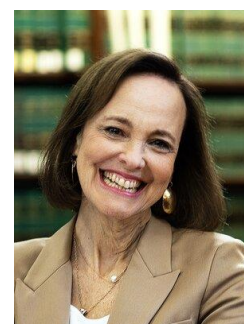
For Kohlmann, a longtime BigLaw litigator and co-chair of Jenner & Block's trademark practice, the bar creates critical opportunities for attorneys to advocate for New Yorkers in need and the rule of law. While the bar is "decidedly not political," Kohlmann said facilitating constructive conversations, initiatives and programs was her main focus as president.

"The bar can truly play a role for people with very diverse views to come together and understand, at least, what the guardrails are," she said. "It's uniquely placed to, hopefully, get people to be able to attack some of our problems."

But first, she had to get attorneys back to the bar by maintaining a delicate balance between in-person events and remote programming. This was particularly difficult to do for younger city attorneys who attended law school remotely or worked from home during the fledgling years of their careers.

"I feel good about bringing people back to the city bar in person at a time when obviously we were all coming back from COVID," she said. "I feel really good about the breadth of the issues that I think the members in a really substantive way touched on."

When she began, Kohlmann said, she got a task force on civic education off the ground. The bar under



Susan Kohlmann

Kohlmann also established a task force on digital technologies to explore legal tech issues like cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. She became involved in a variety of other issues, including bolstering voter protections and supporting legal institutions.

"We wrote several letters and statements about what was going on with respect to the rule of law and kind of the attacks that were occurring on the independence of judges," Kohlmann said.

The NYC Bar has more than 150 committees focused on an array of issues and legal practices, from copyright and cannabis to trade secrets and animal rights. The City Bar Fund acts as the nonprofit arm of the organization and a Small Law Firm Center supports solo practitioners and boutiques. The bar also has two justice centers, one offering free legal services locally and another focused on international matters.

"It really runs the gamut," Kohlmann said. "It's quite extraordinary."

As president, Kohlmann reviewed all reports, statements and testimony that came from the bar committees. She helped the NYC Bar put together programs, lobby governments and advocate for policy changes, such as an expansion of the right to counsel or the repeal of a cap on how many judges can be elected to the state Supreme Court. The bar filed an amicus brief in support of federal receivership of the Rikers Island jail complex and opposed a state plan to divert millions from New York's Interest on Lawyer Account Fund. And, at the end of March, the bar put together a program on hate speech.

"In some ways, that program turned out to be incredibly timely," Kohlmann said. "It preceded what happened on campuses across the country, but it certainly developed and evolved from what had occurred."

The all-day program featured professors and deans discussing "the underpinnings of the First Amendment versus academic freedoms," Kohlmann said.

Establishing an environment where people can "attack some of those problems" was at the core of what Kohlmann wanted to do at the bar, particularly as people remained "in their own bubbles." This was especially challenging since the October attack in Israel ignited the ongoing conflict in Gaza and a conversation around Palestinians' future.

"The bar is a really important institution at the moment," she said.

A lifelong New Yorker, Kohlmann said the bar's advocacy for the neediest city residents remains the organization's beating heart.

"We pay attention to issues about the city and the home in which we live and the people who live here," she said, adding: "There are just so many New Yorkers in need. And the needs are great."

Kohlmann took two pro bono cases through the City Bar Justice Center despite juggling her duties as president and an active private practice at Jenner & Block. Thankfully, the bar's headquarters is just a block from the firm's New York office.

"Without having the support of the firm, it would not have been possible for me to do this," she added.

With Faridi now president, Kohlmann said the profession must continue to focus on improving diversity,

equity and inclusion despite lawsuits filed in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2023 ruling on affirmative action. While she said the legal profession in the city is "thriving," Kohlmann said attorneys need to use their voice to ensure that remains the case.

"Lawyers are uniquely situated and have an obligation to speak out loudly and clearly when our institutions are under attack," she said. "There is a bully pulpit and I think it's an opportunity that can't go to waste."

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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