

Profile of New Perimeter Board Member, Barbara Arnwine

According to her mother, Vera, Barbara Arnwine “was born into this world fighting for justice.” Vera had decided she was going to give birth to Barbara at a segregated “whites only” hospital in her community. So she waited until her contractions were 5 minutes apart, and then went to the hospital. The doctor tried to turn her away, but when he saw that she was going to have a baby any minute, he had no choice but to allow her to deliver there.

Given this start in the world, it’s not surprising that Barbara Arnwine has made it her life’s work to fight for civil rights. Growing up in Los Angeles, her parents always struggled to make ends meet for her and for their other 11 children. In this environment, she was surrounded by “people who were really talented [but who] did not get the opportunities they deserved,” explains Arnwine. “I hated it.”

After attending Scripps College, Arnwine took a position as a clerk for a local lawyer and found her calling. “Here was a field where my talents could be used to help more people in a very different way,” she says. “I saw the law as keys that could unlock doors for those who had been locked out to enter society.”

Arnwine attended Duke Law School, where she was one of only a handful of women and African Americans, and where male law students posted notes on her door telling her to get married and drop out of school. As she always does, Arnwine persevered, and after several years with Durham Legal Aid, she headed north to take a position as Executive Director of the Boston Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights. After just a few years, she was asked to apply for the position of Executive Director of the National Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, a position she now has held for 20 years.

Ms. Arnwine also has been involved with a number of international initiatives on behalf of women and minorities that made her a natural fit for the New Perimeter Board. She has led a delegation to the United Nations NGO Forum and Forth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which contributed to a United Nations Platform for Action for women who confront multiple forms of discrimination. In 2001, she represented African descendants from the Americas in helping to draft provisions of the program for action of the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia (WCAR) and related intolerance in Durban, South

Africa. In 2000, she convened the third national conference on African American Women in the Law in Washington, DC, where 250 participants contributed to a Report and Action Agenda for advocacy before the UN General Assembly Special Session on Women.

When asked about the accomplishments for which she is most proud, Arnwine cites the Lawyers’ Committee’s Fair Housing Project and its Rebuilding Foundations of Home Ownership Project (on which DLA Piper has been a project partner, see story on page 7). And then there is the Election Protection Program, which, according to Arnwine “empowers voters to cast a vote and have it counted.” Following the events surrounding the 2000 presidential election, including the mass-disenfranchisement of thousands of minority voters, she and her colleagues at the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law established what is now the nation’s largest voter protection effort—an effort which in November helped thousands of citizens exercise their right to vote (see Election Protection story, page 21).

Despite these achievements, Arnwine is ever-modest about her accomplishments. Rather than taking the credit for the creativity and breadth of her organization’s work, she credits her colleagues at the Lawyers’ Committee, noting that it is its “incredible staff leadership and creativity” that makes the Lawyers’ Committee the top-notch organization it is today.

