



**January 26, 2018**

**WIL Highlights for Sarah Ernst, Partner at Alston & Bird, and 2016-2017 President of OnBoard**

**“Progress in Women’s Leadership from the C-Suite to the Boardroom: Advocacy, Inspiration and Connections”**

Sarah Ernst, Partner at Alston & Bird and former president of OnBoard, was the perfect leader to kick off this year’s Women in Leadership seminar series. For her topic, Sarah chose “Progress in Women’s Leadership from the C-Suite to the Boardroom: “Advocacy, Inspiration and Connections.”

***Her Story: Early Years***

Before sharing some compelling data and highlights from OnBoard’s annual study on women’s progress, Sarah inspired the audience with her own life/career story beginning with a photo of her mother. “When my mother was growing up,” Sarah said, “she was told that her only career options were nursing and teaching. But she had her own ideas, and she decided to become a lawyer, as part of the first generation of women to go to law school. ” Sarah described the incredible role that other women played in her mother’s career – mentoring her and inspiring her – including Sandra Day O’Connor, the first female justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Sarah’s mother’s strength and determination also inspired Sarah. “From my mother and all of my early life experiences,” she said, “I learned valuable lessons in self-confidence and resilience - and a certain amount of stubbornness.” These traits propelled Sarah to consider her own career path. At 16, she decided that would be a career in the intelligence service.

With that goal in mind, Sarah entered the United States Naval Academy. After 2 years and realizing that she would not be permitted to pursue an intelligence career through the Navy, Sarah left the Academy to transfer to the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. To fund her education, Sarah also worked as a defense consultant while attending Georgetown.

***Life Takes a Turn***

The next chapter of Sarah’s life would include an early marriage and earning her J.D. degree from the University of Oklahoma. (Yes, she made the decision to go to law school with the prodding of her mother, although she had no desire to become a litigator.)

But everything changed after 9/11/2001. Sarah said, “Within weeks after getting married, moving to Oklahoma and starting law school, my husband deployed and I had to figure out how to live this new life on my own. I was lucky enough to be surrounded by the most amazing

people in Oklahoma who made the adjustment so much easier.” Upon graduating from law school, Sarah started a new job with Alston & Bird and moved to Atlanta, where she again started a new life on her own.

Fast forward to present day and clearly, Sarah’s life is on a very positive track. She’s happily remarried and is experiencing the joys of motherhood. Sarah’s career has been on an upward trajectory since joining Alston & Bird, thanks in part to strong mentors and advocates. Sarah has been recognized as one of Atlanta’s “top attorneys under 40” and a “Rising Star” in her field. She’s also a leader in the community - one who’s especially active in promoting OnBoard’s mission to increase the number of women on GA’s public boards and in executive leadership.

### ***2017 Highlights re Progress in Women’s Leadership: By the Numbers***

Sarah then discussed the importance of advocacy, inspiration and connections in helping women to succeed in the C-suite and the boardroom, as she had experienced in her own career success. She also described the business case for including women in the boardroom and in executive leadership, and the particular impact from having three or more women on a corporate board.

***“One woman is the invisibility phase, two women are the conspiracy phase, and three women are mainstream.” (From research interviews)***

- OnBoard (an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization) celebrated 25 years of making an impact through the organization’s mission. In 1993 women made up only 4% of director positions on GA’s public companies. By 2017, the percentage was 13.8%.
- In 2017, almost 25% of all director positions that were eligible to be filled were filled by women. This was up from 20% in 2016.
- 18 of Georgia based companies now have at least 3 women on their board. Called the “Power of 3” – this is the number at which research shows that women are able to change the dynamics of a board and make a significant impact on the company.
- 12.9% Women executives and officers in GA public companies (up from 12.1% the previous year)
- 2.5% Women of color (up from 2.2%)
- 60.5% of all GA public companies have at least 1 woman on their board

Sarah further discussed the impact of OnBoard in increasing the number of women in executive leadership and on corporate boards:

- 73 Searches have been done to help companies find board candidates
- 23 Women gained a board seat with the help or influence of OnBoard
- 85% Fortune 500 Atlanta – based companies are involved with OnBoard
- 8 Programs and initiatives are currently undertaken by OnBoard to help the current and future generation of women leaders prepare for board service

- Nearly 150 ATL executives and community leaders have signed on as ADVOCATES for OnBoard – giving financial as well as personal support to the mission of OnBoard – and that’s in addition to the hundreds who support OnBoard through their membership in the organization