



THE NEW ELLIS GROUP

Monday Monday

Connecting the Dots with Karen Kaplowitz



*Helping you create and reinforce the habits of successful career building,
gleaned from my work as a business development strategist, trainer and coach*

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What Does the “Inclusion” in Diversity & Inclusion Look Like?

Fresh out of the University of Chicago Law School in 1971, I became an associate at O’Melveny & Myers in Los Angeles. I was the firm’s third woman lawyer, joining two other women associates, Kathleen Peratis and Diana Walker. Partner Don Wessling, a fellow Chicago alum who had recruited me and mentored me, was keen on having more women in the firm. The firm provided a welcoming environment.

Just one incident at the firm marred my feeling of inclusion. The firm fielded three teams for the Los Angeles Lawyers’ Basketball League. I joined the C team, appropriate for my size and skill level, and practiced with my team with no problem. But when I showed up at a local high school for the first game, the referee would not let me play. When I asked why, the referee came up with two excuses: that the League’s insurance policy only covered men and that the City of Los Angeles restricted use of the high school court to men. I was humiliated at being excluded. My teammates ultimately went ahead and played without me.

The next day, I sent a letter to the lawyer who ran the Lawyers’ League to object to having been excluded by the referee. I said that I did not believe they had an insurance policy that specified men only and asked to see the policy. I also questioned the excuse that the City restricted use of the Fairfax High School basketball court to men. I said that I did not believe that excuse either since it would have been unconstitutional for the City to bar women from playing in a public facility.

I was surprised and hurt when the two senior associates who organized the firm’s three teams burst into my office to complain about my having objected to being excluded from playing. I was stunned that instead of supporting me that they said that the firm had a great relationship with the referee and that my objection might jeopardize that relationship.

I persisted in fighting for the right of women to play basketball in the Los Angeles Lawyers League. Kathleen Peratis joined me for lunch with Charles English, the lawyer who headed the League. He insisted that excluding me and other women was just for our own safety. He was a big guy and said that he was afraid that he would hurt women if we played.

One lawyer in the firm really went out of his way while this issue played out: Bill Gould. I was reminded of his decency and support when I read in the O’Melveny & Myers alumni newsletter that Bill died recently at age 79 of multiple myeloma. Bill invited me to join him and other lawyers in the firm for lunchtime basketball at Beverly Hills High School which was around the corner from the firm’s Century City office. Bill simply took it on himself to help me feel included. He was a great guy. These events took place more than 45 years ago, but they remain vivid. Ultimately, the Lawyers’ League allowed women to play. By then, I had moved on, but I have never forgotten the generosity of spirit and inclusiveness of Bill Gould.

I am now an adviser to the Working Mother Best Law Firms for Women initiative and will have the privilege at the [Gala Awards Luncheon](#) in Chicago on October 26 of congratulating O’Melveny & Myers, which is again on the Working Mother list of Best Law Firms for Women. I am sure that Bill Gould would be proud.