

Reimagining *Togetherness* During the Pandemic

By Diane Fleming Averell, DRI National Director

On September 9, I celebrated my 18th anniversary with my firm, Porzio Bromberg & Newman PC. I love my firm. I joined Porzio as a second-year associate, was promoted to counsel while on maternity leave in 2007, and then to partner after my second maternity leave in 2011. As women struggle to stay in our beloved profession, I have been blessed to grow up in an organization that embraces innovation and flexibility to foster a highly engaged workplace community—all working together to serve our clients. Sure, we make substantial investments in technology and skills training to allow our people to meet client needs around the clock, untethered to our office buildings. We also make substantial investments in our people to foster a culture of inclusion, integrity, collegiality, and respect. And so our people spend time together—apart from client work—celebrating at monthly socials and holiday parties, engaging in diversity and inclusion roundtables, preparing meals at homeless shelters, and playing games at family picnics. Our people invest in one another, too, which has always made the Porzio team feel like a family. We share and support each other through the most significant parts of our lives: weddings, births, graduations, illness, and the passing of loved ones. We work hard, we laugh hard, and we share a ton of great food (and then diet)—all of it, *together*.

And then COVID-19 hit, and we were forced to reimagine *togetherness*.

With our headquarters in New Jersey, Porzio's workforce went fully remote on March 18, when COVID-19 started its devastating assault on the Garden State. Thanks to our

IT infrastructure, Porzio has maintained full and seamless business functionality with great success. Like so many of you, we have embraced virtual platforms to engage with clients, courts, and adversaries to keep cases moving during the pandemic. The legal industry and the businesses we serve have demonstrated amazing creativity, flexibility, and resilience to sustain operations amid great global uncertainty. Six months into the pandemic, you get the sense that we all have settled into this environment and hit



our stride in terms of productivity and effectiveness—business almost as usual.

That said, the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the individuals who comprise our organizations cannot be understated. The U.S. statistics are staggering: 6.5 million cases of COVID-19,

with over 191,000 deaths and counting. As life sciences companies race to formulate a safe and effective vaccine, the nation is concurrently battling crises of public health, racial and social injustice, public safety, and economy—all against the backdrop of one of the most volatile political climates in modern U.S. history. Millions of Americans are coping with all of this while continuing to work from home and supporting children on virtual education platforms. It's exhausting.

Keeping our people *together* has never been more necessary. There is no substitute for connecting in-person, but connecting virtually or by phone is the next best thing. At Porzio, we have been intentional about hosting frequent business-focused meetings, trainings, and social events on virtual platforms. Our Workplace Diversity & Inclusion Initiative has provided a variety of virtual roundtables and educational programs to engage our people in the

pursuit of racial equality and social justice, including our “Porzio 21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge,” which asked our people to commit 15–20 minutes a day for 21 consecutive days to complete a syllabus of short readings and videos focused on the Black Experience. Practice group and department leaders also hold regular one-on-one “check-in” calls with team members. And when government restrictions on gatherings started to ease, our people returned to delivering meals at the local homeless shelter.

My managing partner, Vito A. Gagliardi, Jr., took reimagining *togetherness* one monumental step further by having two open-air tents installed outside of our Morristown, New Jersey, office. Vito recognized that our people were hungry to interact safely, but in-person, during these warm summer months. The tents have been a welcome refuge and forum for connecting in small groups. So long as the autumn months stay pleasant, we’ve scheduled a few depositions to take place under the big tops as well. Ingenuity in action.

I spent my 18th anniversary meeting with my longtime friends and colleagues under the tents. We wore masks and sat six feet apart in chairs we brought from home. It was wonderful.

Later this year, I will celebrate my 18th year as a DRI member. I love DRI. Through my membership in DRI—and in the Women in the Law Committee (WITL), in particular—I have developed clients, collaborators, heroes, coaches, allies, and best friends across the United States. Those connections always started and deepened with shared experiences at in-person events, especially substantive law committee (SLC) seminars and DRI’s Annual Meetings every October. What makes DRI great is the way it brings us, its members, *together*.

DRI’s commitment to supporting and bringing members *together* has never been more apparent than in this pandemic environment. With COVID-19 forcing the cancellation of in-person seminars during the spring and summer of 2020, DRI’s Executive Committee, Law Institute, and staff leveraged the organization’s resources toward reimagining the structure and delivery of the traditional conference experiences through virtual platforms. Now, the SLCs are working tirelessly to create and offer 13 first-rate virtual seminars that feature dynamic speakers,

cutting-edge topics, and meaningful networking opportunities. DRI and its leaders have done so much in just a few months to continue serving the needs of its members and, for that, I am incredibly grateful and proud.

As a member of the 2020 Annual Meeting Steering Committee, I have witnessed how hard DRI leaders are working to deliver an outstanding [Virtual Annual Meeting](#) this October that remains true to everything members love and value about the event. Led by President-Elect Emily Coughlin and 2020 Annual Meeting Chair Alex Hagan, the steering committee has created a blockbuster program featuring political heavyweights Paul Begala and Mike Murphy, as well as former Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Twenty-six DRI SLCs have collaborated to offer eight exciting sessions that will showcase the best and brightest of the civil defense bar. The mainstage program promises to be entertaining, forward thinking, and pitch perfect with the Annual Meeting’s theme of “Getting Back to Business” despite the ongoing pandemic.

What makes the Annual Meeting great, year after year, is the way it brings longtime members and new members *together*. This year is no exception. The steering committee has created numerous opportunities for people to connect virtually in meaningful ways. The Annual Meeting will kick off with a welcome reception for first-time attendees, and terrific events specifically tailored for state and local defense organizations and their executive directors. DRI affinity groups—Diversity and Inclusion Committee, Young Lawyers Committee, and WITL—have mastered the art and technology of virtual networking, and will host an exciting event for all to enjoy. Attendees can join DRI for Life for “Mindfulness Meditation and Chair Yoga” and a Virtual 5K Run to support [Operation Gratitude](#). Finally, in true DRI tradition, folks will come *together* to honor member achievement with the Annual Awards Ceremony, and then celebrate the new officers and directors of DRI with the Swearing-In Ceremony.

COVID-19 makes it more difficult, but not impossible, to bring people *together*. To date, more than 1,700 members have registered for the Annual Meeting, which makes it clear that the DRI community is thrilled to see and engage with one another—virtually or otherwise. This October, I will celebrate my 18th anniversary with DRI by spending time with my longtime friends and new colleagues during the [Virtual Annual Meeting](#). It will be wonderful.