

And turn heads the paper did, as it began dishing dirt in addition to the more prosaic content. The “Inadmissible” column debuted in 1990, summarizing the tribulations and achievements of lawyers, judges and politicians. In 1995, the paper introduced “Winners and Losers.” A recent issue’s losers included a partner of a large law firm who had been arrested for misappropriating a client’s money. One of the winners was an attorney who prevailed in a precedent-setting case.

The controversial ranking of Superior Court judges, which first appeared in 1989, is based on a survey of trial lawyers. They rate judges on demeanor, respect, fairness and legal knowledge. As the first public evaluation of New Jersey’s judges, it kicked up a firestorm when it premiered. Robert Wilentz, then chief justice of the state Supreme Court, denounced it as a pernicious popularity contest, tempting judges to play to the crowd and threatening their independence. Even some lawyers criticized the list. Still, the judicial surveys that

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Editor in chief, *New Jersey Law Journal*

followed in 1993 and 1999 saw increasing numbers of survey responses.

“While opposition comes from the court system, lawyers love it,” Fleury says. “It’s the only place they can find any form of qualifying information about a judge’s strengths and weaknesses.”

In 1987, the paper debuted its annual list of Top 10 revenue-generating law



Steinbaum’s team has added features like a winners and losers column while maintaining the paper’s crusading edge.

firms, since expanded to 20. “Law firms were astounded to be asked what they earned and felt worse about having it published,” Fleury says. “But little by little, they gained an understanding that this is a business environment, not just a community of colleagues. Being part of the Top 20 is a market distinction that, even if they won’t admit it, law firms would like.”

But that doesn’t mean all of the state’s attorneys relished the chance to appear in the pages of the *Journal*. In 1992 the New Jersey State Bar Association launched its own weekly, *New Jersey Lawyer*. Like the *Journal*, it carries legal notices and digests of court decisions. However, the *Lawyer* is a thinner paper with a smaller staff and a subscription rate of \$199 per year, compared with \$385 per year or \$265 for solo lawyers for the *Journal*. The *Lawyer*, whose circulation is not audited, claims a paid circulation of just over 8,000.

“There is no question that the *New Jersey Lawyer* was established to present a different point of view and to be less gossip,” says Cynthia Jacob, former president of the New Jersey State Bar Association.

In response to the competition, says Steinbaum, “We knew we had to be better than what we’d been.” Improvements have included bolstering the paper’s traditional law coverage with investigative stories. A 1996 article questioned whether Megan’s Law would have saved Megan Kanka. Writer Tim O’Brien found that most of the people in the Kankas’ neighborhood al-

ready knew there was a convicted sexual offender living nearby.

“We have a good secondary beat on government issues,” says Steinbaum, who was an assistant U.S. attorney in Newark from 1979 to 1984. “Lawyers don’t need to know it to practice law, but we view our role as covering government because government is composed of law.”

The *Journal* has always done some crusading. Its first editor, State Senator Edward Q. Keasbey, wrote pieces imploring the state to simplify the judicial system. In the 1940s, the paper launched a series of front-page editorials promoting court reform. Some of the ideas—which echoed those voiced by Keasbey a generation earlier—were adopted in a 1946 amendment to the state constitution.

While the *Journal’s* circulation may be relatively modest, its readership is a loyal one. Jack Furlong, a West Trenton criminal and civil rights lawyer, has been reading the publication with interest for more than 20 years. “It is the most recent statement of the law; it is the most recent statement of the profession and it tells you what the real deal is with every judge and lawyer in the state,” Furlong says. “They tend to bullet-point it for you.”

“Readers like the snappiness of our articles,” says Steinbaum. “We don’t pull punches and there are no sacred cows.” ■

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