

Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future

This series was inspired by Roger Williams University School of Law's annual *Women in Robes* event, and was created in alliance with their exciting new project *The First Women*, which recognizes and honors the first women of the Rhode Island bar.



Barbara Margolis, Esq.

Upon graduating from the University of Rhode Island in 1977 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in psychology, Barbara Margolis, now retired Deputy Disciplinary Counsel, knew she wanted to make the world a better place. She initially thought she would pursue her goal by becoming a feminist therapist. Her mother guided her toward attending law school, encouraging Attorney Margolis to pursue something that would help her gain more “power” to represent and advocate for those who needed help.

Although originally from Utica, New York, she attended New England School of Law part-time while working full-time. As she worked her way through law school, she volunteered with Merrimack Valley Legal Services and represented victims of abuse seeking divorces. She also spent time working as a messenger at a law firm with ten attorneys, where the gender double-standard was alive and well. Although she and another law student (a male) were both hired at the same time, she was tasked as a messenger, while the male student was tasked with work befitting an individual pursuing a legal education. That discrimination did not dissuade or discourage Attorney Margolis as she never intended to pursue a “big law” career.

Upon graduation, she immediately sought out

non-profit work in Rhode Island. However, due to budget cuts implemented by President Regan, legal aid services throughout the country were significantly reduced and full-time legal aid positions were not available.

With no clients and no connections in Rhode Island (beyond her college education) she thought to herself, “What’s the worst that could happen?” and chose to hang her shingle as a solo practitioner in family law. She found an office space for rent from two male attorneys in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. As a condition for her renting that space, she was asked to promise not to “do abortions” (or, rather, litigate any issues relating to abortion). After settling in, she began reaching out to the community to offer her legal services. She contacted several nonprofit organizations to offer her services and determine what she could do to fulfill the need of the people in the State.

After a while, she discovered that she was spending most of her time practicing in South County, so she left her space in Pawtucket and opened a solo practice there. She was later joined by Lise Iwon and Margaret Laurence. They worked together for a while until Attorneys Iwon and Laurence split into their own firm—at which time Attorney Margolis picked up part-time work at the Legal Aid Society of Rhode Island. She eventually closed her private practice and worked full-time for the Legal Aid Society, ultimately becoming its chief legal counsel—a position that she held from 1989 to 1995.

As chief legal counsel, she worked tirelessly to ensure that her *team* worked tirelessly. She reflected that the work was rewarding but exhausting. During that time she was very involved in several legal organizations, including the Rhode Island Bar Association House of Delegates. She was also part of the efforts to combine the Coalition of Women Lawyers and the Women Lawyers Association, which later became the Rhode Island Women’s Bar Association. She was joined in these efforts by the Honorable Florence K. Murray, the first female Associate Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. Justice Murray



Cassandra L. Feeney, Esq.
Adler, Cohen, Harvey,
Wakeman & Guekguezian,
LLP, Providence



Etie-Lee Schaub, Esq.
Providence City Solicitor’s
Office

later nominated Attorney Margolis to the Rhode Island Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel. She recalls the female judges and justices in Rhode Island had their eyes out to support women, and Attorney Margolis encourages all women to continue in this tradition—“Women have to take care of each other.” For example, “Always write letters of support for one another.”

She also organized an informal group of gay lawyers to provide support for one another—the “630 Club” (named after the time they met)—and, in collaboration with other female attorneys living openly, started the LGBT committee of the Rhode Island Bar, which initially focused on educating the bar on issues important to the LGBTQ community.

It was her work with the Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel that first brought her to the judiciary’s attention in an ethics-related role. When the Honorable Mary Lisi left her role as Chief Disciplinary Counsel for the Supreme Court of Rhode Island to become a District Judge for the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island, Attorney Margolis applied for, and became, Deputy Disciplinary Counsel for the Supreme Court of Rhode Island—a position in which she has served for more than twenty-five years.

In reflecting upon her career and her work as Deputy Disciplinary Counsel, she had plenty of advice on how to be a good legal practitioner. Fundamentally, do good work and always have the law on your side. “It’s not magic. Know the law, and people respect that. I was always clear and direct; when billing by the hour and advocating for clients, you don’t play games. To some practitioners, every ‘battle’ is personal and ‘winning is everything.’ But, doing your job well, being able to advocate on behalf of someone, and having the respect of your peers—that’s winning. There’s no need to throw firebombs or make personal attacks.” She later added, “One of our greatest faults as lawyers is that we do not like to be wrong or told what to do. Be aware of this and help others be aware of this.”

Attorney Margolis certainly encountered barri-

ers throughout her career, including sexist behavior from other practitioners and court staff. She fought through those barriers and earned the respect of her peers by always coming to court prepared and unafraid to try a case. For those facing inequality or confronting barriers simply because they are perceived as different, she noted: "If your good work is not recognized, move on. There needs to be a partnership, and there needs to be equality. Be willing to leave." For those who witness inequality, she urged: "It is all of our responsibility. If you see something, say something. We have to talk about it, and we have to address it. It is about standing up for yourself and helping others stand up for themselves." She also advised, "Take a step back. Sometimes, a person may have no idea they hurt you or offended you. Tell them how they made you feel and ask how they felt. Give them an opportunity to learn and to rise above."

As Deputy Disciplinary Counsel, some common issues she has had to address include instances of attorneys who do not return calls from opposing counsel or their own clients, or those who make exaggerated statements or adopt statements in pleadings without much, or any, research. Some may think they are serving their client with speed or competition, but that is not the case. Opposing counsel may go to court to strike the statements—or even seek sanctions. "It is a big bar, but people learn of your reputation, skills, and how easy you are to deal with by word of mouth. Try to respect all people, even though it may not always be easy, and say it with a smile."

Another piece of advice: "Things go back around and around, and the energy you put out comes back. Walk in the world you want to be in. Instead of pounding your head against the wall for change you cannot make, focus your energy into the things you can control."

She also noted the importance of participating in the legal community as a means to grow, develop, and find support. Contributing to a community of support was incredibly important and helpful to her. "Be an open person, network, and participate in the bar; it is an opportunity to meet on a social level and gain support. Be willing to talk about who you are and be authentic. That's all you have."

Attorney Margolis built her own community of strong women (about sixty!) who are not all lawyers and still connect on a monthly basis to provide support and advice. These women, as well as her wife Colleen, gave her the strength to overcome the difficulties faced by our profession and the confidence to take risks. She hopes that others can find the resources to do the same and that women will continue to mentor and raise women up.

"What we do is hard. People need to take care of themselves. Find a community, whatever it is—for some that may be a 5:00 a.m. spin class; take a break; recognize our career is hard; and try not to go it alone." Attorney Margolis commented that she sees a lot of lawyers with self-imposed disabilities: "Case selection is very important. Don't put yourself in a position you hate, and if you find yourself in that position, change. Lawyers are very good at hiding things and hiding from ourselves. There is a lot of ego involved in being a lawyer, so many do not ask for help. But being able to ask for advice is a strength."

She reminds and encourages lawyers to reach out to the confidential Lawyers Helping Lawyers Committee of the RI Bar Association by visiting the Bar's website at ribar.com and clicking the Do You Need Confidential Assistance quick link, as well as the Ethics Committee and the Office of Disciplinary Counsel. "We know what it is like out there. It is better to be proactive. Ask."

If you are interested in sharing your story or know someone who is, please contact Cassandra L. Feeney at cfeeney@adlercohen.com and/or Etie-Lee Schaub at etieschaub@gmail.com. ♦