

# 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.



Lise J. Gescheidt, Esq.

Like many lawyers of her generation, Lise Gescheidt was inspired to pursue law after watching *Perry Mason*. From the age of 13, she knew she would follow that path. As an only child, she received the

support and encouragement she needed to pursue her goal. Leaving Florida to attend Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, she graduated in 1974 with a major in history and a minor in psychology. Hers was the second co-educational graduating class from that institution. Although she was tempted to put her legal career on hold to “bum around” the Greek Islands, she did not waver from her goal and attended Boston College Law School, graduating in 1977.

While in college, she fell in love with Newport, working as a bartender there during her summer breaks. It should be no surprise that while pursuing her goal of becoming a public defender, she volunteered at the Rhode Island Public Defender's Office. Upon graduation, she became an assistant public defender, working with lawyers like Barbara Hurst and Allegra Munson, both of whom were tough women and great teachers.

During her first six months as an assistant public defender, Attorney Gescheidt worked in the appellate division in an age before computers. While working there, her practice focused on conducting legal research in actual books, drafting briefs, and arguing before the Supreme Court. She also had the opportunity to work on an amicus brief regarding the insanity defense. Women lawyers appearing before the Rhode Island Supreme Court was not unusual in those days, and she generally felt comfortable and accepted in that role. However, once she switched to the trial court, “sexism and the old boy network were rampant.”

Some of the instances of sexist behavior

could be dismissed as “ignorance,” while some perpetrators were “just plain pigs.” Groping and unwanted physical contact with women lawyers, their secretaries, and female clerks were common. When she and other women were not victimized by unwanted physical actions, they would be marginalized or ignored. She relayed an occasion where she was the only woman attorney among three male colleagues on trial. When the judge took the bench, he greeted counsel with “Good morning, *gentlemen*.” Opposing counsel could also be patronizing. If you showed emotion as a female attorney, “the men across the aisle would treat you like your hormones were raging.” Turning to other women for support was not always a comfort. No one talked about the elephant in the room; you did not want to complain for fear that no one would believe you or that you would be perceived as overly sensitive.

Men who wielded their power outside of the courtroom also stood in opposition to women participating in the criminal justice system. For example, men working for the Department of Corrections blocked women from entering prisons to speak with their clients because they were wearing underwire bras that set off the metal detectors (while allowing other metal objects, like keys and belt buckles). When women removed their bras in the bathroom before visits, they were blocked again and told that women who did not wear bras could not enter either. Women were also denied entrance to the prison for wearing open-toed shoes or sandals. On one occasion, Attorney Gescheidt was finally allowed into the prison wearing golf spikes because she had no other shoes that were acceptable to the guard.

Attorney Gescheidt worked in the Public Defender's Office for nine years before changing career paths by practicing civil litigation at Adler Pollock & Sheehan. However, the civil bar was not any more welcoming of a female practitioner than in the criminal bar. Other attorneys would talk down to her and called her “deary.” Further, clients openly objected to being represented by a “woman lawyer.”



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



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

After eighteen months practicing civil law, she decided to leave and return to practicing criminal law. She took a “beach leave” of several months before starting her own practice, and later became a partner in MacFadyen, Gescheidt & O'Brien. Attorney Gescheidt spent the rest of her career working as a private criminal defense attorney where she represented both paying and court-appointed clients in serious criminal cases, abuse and neglect cases in Family Court, and in front of the Parole Board. After spending forty-one years practicing law, she recently assumed semi-retirement status and became a practicing farmer and horticulturalist.

Being a woman lawyer was challenging in the beginning of her career. She worked hard to gain self-confidence while learning the subtleties of the law and the art of persuasion, not to mention the management of staggering caseloads – “It was terrifying as a young lawyer, not knowing anything.” In addition to this, she had to navigate a sexist and patronizing legal system. Attorney Gescheidt “worked her ass off,” had supportive mentors, and gave back to the profession through her work on committees. She also “went out for a beer” with her colleagues and developed strong personal relationships with opposing counsel. On one occasion after a judge had been “very nasty” to her in chambers, opposing counsel, a male attorney, called her just to tell her he was sorry that she was treated in that manner and that she did nothing to deserve it. Through it all, you have to “. . . go in, roll with it, and give it the best you can do. Being a lawyer is a lot of work, sacrifice, and fun.”

Although she “played the game” to do what was best for her clients, putting up with the demands of criminal defense work wore on her. She observed that the legal profession has changed over time, raising a question as to whether it is still an honorable profession. She is disappointed to see how lawyers disrespect other lawyers, their clients, as well as the Court. She also sees how the Court can disrespect lawyers as well. “Some of it may be insecurity or a need to exert control

over a system that is out of control,” she postulated. She would like to see lawyers and judges acting like “real people guided by their conscience, not [by their] ego or fear of negative press coverage. . . .Some people with no experiential basis should not be making judgments about people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Ultimately, whatever role you assume in this human drama called justice, you have to look yourself in the mirror, like yourself, and feel good about the work you do. You look back at your life, and you can’t get those years back.” She also advised to “be yourself, wear the clothes that make you comfortable – whether it is cowboy boots or a shirt with a bowtie – and consider smelling the roses while you still have a sense of smell.”

As for working to continue to overcome sexism, “You have to look at each other as individuals, not based on sex. We are all in this together, and we have to be supportive of and kind to each other.” ◇