

# 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 Iwon, Esq. (left) and Peg Laurence, Esq. (right)

*I wanted to change the world and help those in need," explained Lise Iwon when describing why she left her job as a teacher in Wisconsin to attend law school in New Hampshire. As a 1L at the Franklin Pierce Law Center, she met Margaret "Peg" Laurence, who later became her partner in life and in law. Together, they were committed to leading their lives in the pursuit of helping others.*

After law school, Peg and Lise founded Laurence & Iwon in Wakefield, RI. While Peg worked primarily in real estate law, Lise focused on family law, working at times as a court-appointed advocate for abused or neglected children and working for the American Civil Liberties Union ("ACLU").

As a lesbian litigator, Lise bore witness to shocking incidents of unconscionable behavior performed by members of our bar.

In one case where she sought a restraining order on behalf of her client, opposing counsel requested a chambers conference. Lise had never participated in a chambers conference, but was appalled when opposing counsel alleged that Lise's client was performing sexual services for money. Lise clarified for the judge that the statement was untrue and said, "If this is how chambers conferences go, I am walking out," which she did. Outside of chambers, opposing counsel confronted her about why she left. She

explained that he had lied to the judge—to which he then threatened her, saying Lise should "watch her back."

During another chambers conference held to discuss an agreed-upon dismissal of a traffic ticket, a judge, while smoking a cigar, ordered Lise to spit out her mint because he "hated the scent of mint." He stated he recognized her as working with the ACLU and "marching in a gay pride parade." He revealed troubling prejudice as he went on to tell her that since gay people do not belong on this planet, he should be able to kill them if he wanted to. He also told her that babies of gay couples should not be able to be born. Despite the judge functionally telling Lise that he thought he should be able to kill her, she attempted to break the tension stating, "Well, it is a good thing we are not in the same family, as our holiday dinners would be tense." After leaving chambers, the prosecuting police officer and her client (also a lawyer) urged her to file a complaint. She felt that she could not because she had to practice before that judge.

In yet another chambers conference, it was very clear the judge and opposing counsel were very close, as they chatted about recent parties, dinners, and extracurricular activities they and their family did together. The judge then looked to Lise and said, "Okay honey, what is your case about?" Lise explained her case, which was a straightforward constitutional infringement matter supported by the law. The judge asked opposing counsel his thoughts, who simply said he disagreed, and the judge agreed and dismissed her case. Lise questioned the "old boys club" system, where practicing law was more about who you knew and not about the law. "I went to law school for this?" she thought, though she was not deterred. In fact, this made her want to do more. "I like to make things happen."

Eventually, Lise did encounter some behavior that was so appalling that she felt compelled to file complaints with disciplinary counsel—one against an attorney and another against a judge. Lise noted that "they were scary times" for her



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



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

as those complaints wove their way through the system. The investigation of the attorney (who was ultimately suspended) took years, during which time Lise had to continue to practice against the attorney, who would speak ill of her among the bar and threaten her. During the investigation, however, she could not respond to his negative comments or even defend herself.

As to the complaint filed against the judge, many members of the bar thanked her for being the one to finally step up and intervene with such a concerning figure. The judge was ultimately removed from the bench.

She found the strength to fight injustice in the bar due to the unconditional love and support of her wife: "I could not have done it without Peg. She is the one who made it all possible." In addition to the support from Peg, Lise added, "You need a village of love," reflecting that one of the best things she did while practicing was to start a small group of women lawyers who met one time per month to share information and practice tips.

Lise's work paid off for the advancement of her clients and the Rhode Island bar. She has been recognized and honored with two awards from the American Bar Association. In 1996, she was awarded with the Pro Bono Publico Award, and, in 2015, she was awarded the Stonewall Award, recognizing lawyers who have considerably advanced lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in the legal profession and successfully championed LGBT legal causes. In addition to her national recognitions, she was the first lesbian president of the Rhode Island Bar Association and gained the bar's support for same-sex marriage before the Marriage Equality Act. She also won a declaratory ruling for same-sex couples in Rhode Island to take the same marital deductions for estate taxes.

Although Lise retired from the practice of law in 2015, she continues to change the world and make things happen. She serves on twelve boards and organizes fundraisers, including the "Duffle Bag Bash," an event that collects duffel

bags to donate to children in foster care so they no longer have to transport their possessions in trash bags.

Like others, Lise echoes concerns of the evolution of the legal profession; she has observed increasing disrespect and decreased civility due to unreasonable expectations and entitlement. She encourages all lawyers to get involved with the Bar Association and all lawyers, including those who are retired, to give back. "You meet a lot of other lawyers who want to support you, mentor you, and improve the profession. It is inspirational when you help lift the profession and the community."

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