

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.



Lynette J. Labinger, Esq.

As she was completing her junior year at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1970, Attorney Lynette Labinger considered her career options. She had assumed that she would most likely pursue teaching, not because she had any passion for education, but because it was a typical career path for women attending college at that time. While studying Russian history of the 1800s, her interest was re-focused to American current events and civil rights as she participated in Vietnam war protests, teach-ins, and the news coverage of the shooting of unarmed student protesters at Kent State University overtook her college studies. At the same time, she was also dating a student at Harvard. A few of his friends said that they didn't know what they wanted to do after they graduated, so they planned to go to law school. She thought to herself, "if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me."

As a student at NYU Law School, she had the opportunity to work with the New York Legal Aid Society, an organization that provides public defender services for indigent defendants in New York. While working with the organization, whenever she could, she would go down to the criminal courts and observe criminal arraignments. She was also in a program called Root-Tilden (now called Root-Tilden-Kern) which is a merit scholarship program for individuals selected as being committed to their involvement in public

service. As part of that program, she spent time debating the meaning of public service. She initially anticipated that she would be a public defender, but first applied to be a clerk with several federal judges, focusing on judges who were well-known for their decisions in the civil rights arena.

Thus, in 1974, Attorney Labinger started her clerkship in the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island for the Honorable Raymond J. Pettine. She reflects that her time working as a law clerk for a federal judge "spoils you for everything else." In working for Judge Pettine, who used to be a prosecutor, she was often tasked with researching and working on civil litigation issues. She observed that there was a lot of work that could be done in the civil rights arena.

After her clerkship, she became an associate attorney at Abedon, Michaelson, Stanzler, Biener, Skolnik & Lipsey. She worked closely with Milton Stanzler, recognized for his legal work in securing labor rights and civil liberties. While there, she worked on cases of employment discrimination, election rights, and First Amendment cases including a number of cases sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island ("ACLU").



Lynette Labinger with family and friends celebrating the dedication of the Harry and Dorothy Labinger Fitness Center at New England Institute of Technology in April 2018



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Several years later, Attorney Labinger started a legal partnership with attorney John Roney. She and John worked together for over 35 years before John decided to wind down his practice. After they closed the firm, Attorney Labinger limited her practice to cases sponsored by the ACLU, serving her passion for using the law to promote civil liberties and preserve constitutional rights while at the same time saving her from having to deal with the administrative headaches of running a firm.

Attorney Labinger attributes her ability to have achieved and accomplished so much in her career in large part to the support of her husband, Ross Eadie, whom she married in 1972. While Attorney Labinger was the primary breadwinner, Ross provided the primary childcare for their daughter as he is an artist and was able to work from home. He also provided administrative support to Attorney Labinger's law firm as the accounts manager for more than twenty years.

When asked whether or not she felt that discrimination held her back or if her career was made harder because she is a woman, she commented that she was likely oblivious to that kind of discrimination if it did happen to her. She acknowledges that she probably did not get



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certain clients because she was a woman, and not a man, but she never let that stop her. She felt that unless and until she saw a discriminatory behavior or attitude that affected an outcome, then it was the *other* person's problem, and not her problem. Attorney Labinger also felt that she benefitted from attending a law school that had approximately 30% women when she attended. "When there's a significant enough number, you're not looked to as the 'spokesperson' for all women."

She still did recall some situations in the early years of her practice, such as a judge welcoming her, co-counsel, and opposing counsel by saying "hello gentlemen." Clerks at the court would also assume that she wasn't a lawyer when she went to the desk for help for her client. However, she never felt alienated. Attorney Labinger is not exactly certain why (she confesses that it might be due to some underlying self-confidence) but she always felt that she was supposed to be in any room she was in, and never let it get to her.

As an employment rights attorney, she is particularly well-positioned to discuss issues in our own industry. She has periodically consulted with other women attorneys in larger law firms in Rhode Island concerning pay or other treatment issues. She observed that one way to address perceptions or realities of pay inequity would be to promote or require transparency in compensation for employers, including law firms, in Rhode Island. Requiring companies to disclose compensation data (as many public corporations and governments provide) would (1) allow each employee to know, without any "awkward efforts" what others are being paid and (2) incentivize the company to proactively analyze its own data to ensure equity and legal compliance.

In reflecting on her career and life, she noted that it is always a struggle to balance "work" and "life" and there is not enough value placed on the "life" side of the balance. If she could provide one piece of advice, it would be to "do what you love." She understands that not everyone is blessed to be able to do that. "Many come out of law school saddled with huge debt that they have to deal with...but if you're able to find something fulfilling and make a living at it—even if it doesn't make you as much money, don't beat yourself up about it." She referred to the sentiment attributed to Senator Paul Tsongas, who is reported to have said no one on his death bed says, "I wish I had spent more time at the office."

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.

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