

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.



The Honorable Mary M. Lisi

During the civil rights movement of the late 1950s, scenes of dogs attacking unprotected people trying to get their fair share of the American dream struck Judge Mary M. Lisi as “wrong and unjust” and “a perversion of our democratic society.” In the 1960s, she watched young men forced to go to war in Vietnam and the bitter divisions that rocked our country over our involvement in that war. Despite the strong impressions made by these events, she did not yet think about becoming a lawyer.

Instead, she studied to become a teacher at college—one of the three “traditional” career options most women followed (the others included becoming a nurse or secretary, but she “didn’t do blood” and “couldn’t type”). As she strived toward achieving her goal of becoming an educator, the 1970s brought the Watergate scandal. She observed a president violate his oath of office while the people around him perpetrated crimes. Judge Lisi thought to herself, “I want to do more with my life and my education.” Against the backdrop of Watergate, and with encouragement and inspiration from the progress of the women’s movement, she decided to go to law school.

After law school, she became an assistant public defender. She immediately applied to work as a trial lawyer in the Juvenile Division of the RI

Public Defender’s Office because she wanted to help children turn their lives around. For Judge Lisi, it was a great learning experience. Then Public Defender, William Reilly initially said he would ease her in during a transitional period, which, by her account, “lasted about 20 minutes.”

When she started in practice in 1977, there were only a handful of women at the Public Defender’s Office, including Barbara Hurst in the Appellate Division and Allegra Munson in the Superior Court. There were only two female judges in Rhode Island at that time, Justice Corinne Grande and Justice Florence Murray, but no female judges in Family Court.

During her time at the Public Defender’s Office, it was not unusual for her to be the only woman in the courtroom. Although her class at law school was almost fifty percent women, she found that, in practice, many male colleagues and judges seemed uncomfortable interacting with women in the profession. Fortunately, she was able to navigate discriminatory tactics using her quick wit to diffuse the situation. On one occasion, she was inappropriately asked by a judge what kind of perfume she was wearing, and rather than responding in a negative manner, she joked that it was not her perfume but that of the male prosecutor. Her disarming approach to deflate gender-based comments sent a signal that she would not tolerate such conduct, and she found the comments toward her stopped.

The caseload and time in court was staggering as an assistant public defender. “There was no time to start to worry about things, you just had to go in and do it,” she reflected. After four years in the position, Judge Lisi started to grow her family. She recalls getting “the look” from male practitioners and judges as her pregnancy began to show. Although she transitioned to part-time work at the Office of the Child Advocate, there were no family or maternity leave policies. Similar to at least one prior interviewee, Judge Lisi recalls working through her entire pregnancy until the date she delivered her child.

After working at the Office of the Child



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Advocate, she became the director of the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program in the Rhode Island Family Court, where she supervised over twenty on-staff individuals and close to 200 volunteers in addition to managing her own caseload. Judge Lisi is very proud of the work she did in making the CASA Program an effective voice for children in foster care and a model for other states.

After five years as director of the CASA Program, she was hired by the Rhode Island Supreme Court as deputy disciplinary counsel. She later went on to become chief disciplinary counsel. As she did throughout her entire career, she approached this role even-handedly, seeking to protect the public. When she started, the work was mostly confidential. She recalls one of her first cases involved investigating and prosecuting twenty Family Court lawyers who had loaned money to a judge before whom they practiced.

In 1991, Judge Lisi was appointed to the State’s Select Commission to investigate the failure of the Rhode Island Share and Deposit Indemnity Corporation. She, along with fellow Commission members and special counsel, conducted the investigation over two years, which included hundreds of depositions and culminated in a series of publicly televised hearings. That was the first time in her career that her legal abilities were seen by members of the public. Judge Lisi believes she made a favorable impression during her work as a member of the Commission and, as a result, she was recommended to Senator Pell for a federal judgeship.

Judge Lisi was the first woman to become a federal judge in Rhode Island. She was very warmly received—as an equal and as a colleague—by the other judges of the Federal Court. She recalls one judge with a “traditional” family asked her how she “does it,” i.e., having a career and children and a husband with a career. She responded, “You just do it.”

When Judge Lisi first went on the bench, she noticed that there were very few female attorney litigators. She has a few theories as to potential

causes of the lower number of female litigators and partners at law firms. One such cause is the antiquated family leave structure that “needs to change.” Without an equal partner at home, saddling a woman with the full burden of housework in addition to her professional work responsibilities may cause self-deselection from pursuing a career as a litigator.

Over time, Judge Lisi noticed that the number of female litigators did increase, as did the number of men taking on household chores. Judge Lisi is encouraged to see more men taking on what is oftentimes viewed as “women” roles: “We are all in this together, and we all have to share an equal load.”

Judge Lisi reflected she was very fortunate that she married one of those “very special guys.” She attributed much of her ability to successfully manage and balance her heavy workload and career, volunteer, overcome adversity, and raise a family to the love and support provided to her by her husband. He was her best friend and a tremendous partner through it all. During the time they raised two children and while both pursued demanding careers, her husband shouldered his fair share of the work at home while still maintaining a successful career as a practicing attorney.

Judge Lisi also found additional support from colleagues. She was very close to Justice Murray, who was the first female judge in Rhode Island, a “force of nature,” and a wonderful mentor. Justice Murray understood the conflicting obligations between a professional life and personal life as a wife and mother. Judge Lisi also had her trusted assistant Susan (nicknamed “Radar,” based on the character from the show *M*A*S*H*), who often knew what Judge Lisi needed before Judge Lisi knew she needed it.

Her advice to lawyers navigating the system: “Set your priorities and know what they are.” If you are a parent, remember that only you can be that child’s mother or father. If you understand your number one priority—including if that is to be a mother or father—everything else falls into place. The other piece of advice is balance: “It cannot always be just the law, the law, the law. You need to have balance in your life.” One recommendation for balance is to “maintain friendships with those who are not lawyers or in the profession, because they can give you perspective and add a different point of view.”

Judge Lisi also shared the importance of volunteering and getting involved in organizations to supplement your work and who you are: “These activities provide opportunities for you to meet people outside the profession, while also providing an opportunity to share your insights, experiences, and advice, all with a view towards advancing the profession.”

If you are interesting 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. ◇