

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 Netti C. Vogel

The decision for the Honorable Netti C. Vogel to attend law school in 1972 was a hard one, but her biggest challenge “was to change the perception that women weren’t equally as serious as men about practicing law.” Years before her appointment to the Rhode Island Superior Court, Justice Vogel attended New England School of Law, where only ten percent of her graduating class of 1975 were women. While attending law school, Justice Vogel confronted the belief shared by many of her classmates that men attended law school to develop a legal career and use their income to support their family, whereas women were merely “dabbling” and would abandon their career to become full-time mothers. By working hard and committing to a career in law, her law school class developed camaraderie and respect, and the perception shifted from a misogynistic view to an equitable one.

As a practicing lawyer, she continued to face the challenge of changing the perception that women were not equal to her male colleagues.

At Gunning & LaFazia, one of the senior partners felt that if clients discovered that a woman was handling their cases, the clients would perceive the firm to be losing its “machismo.” Although her male colleagues were assigned their own cases, she was expected to work on the

partners’ files. Justice Vogel did not let this pass. She raised the issue with Ray LaFazia, who took matters into his own hands, and started assigning her cases directly.

The next hurdle for Justice Vogel to surmount was the discrimination she experienced from other members of the bar and members of the judiciary. “I cannot count how many times I’ve been called, ‘honey,’ or ‘dear.’ I would respond, ‘Excuse me, save those terms of endearment for someone you are intimate with. I am opposing counsel!’” She explained, “They don’t have to like you. You need them to respect you.” She also relied on guidance from others: “I never forgot the advice I received to never call opposing counsel ‘Mister.’ Always call them by their first name, because you need to put yourself on an equal field with them and never in a position where they are above you.”

Opposing counsel were not the only source of discrimination in the courtroom. A judge once told her early in her legal career, “I don’t think women have the constitution to be litigation lawyers in the Superior Court.” Justice Vogel tried her first case in 1976—one year out of law school—and, by 1977, she was the only Rhode Island female attorney trying back-to-back cases in the private sector. “I tried more cases before that Judge, and he always treated me with respect. By showing I was not meek—but by not being abrasive—that Judge’s view changed without him even realizing it. You have to change perception by being there, working hard, being professional, and knowing the law.”

Although the open hostility to women entering the practice of law has softened since she started her career, Justice Vogel thinks there still needs to be a culture change. “The problem is most men don’t think about it. They exclude because it’s part of their culture and background. They need their consciousness raised.” Men need to be allies. “Treat women with the same level of camaraderie as men. These women worked hard to get where they are. If you don’t serve as an ally and if you are not sensitive to inclusion, you are



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part of the problem. It is discriminatory. You are either inclusive or discriminatory. That’s it.”

Justice Vogel’s message for women attorneys: “If you are a woman and excluded, say something. Also, if men are afraid to socialize with you the way they would socialize with a younger male attorney since the #metoo movement, they are showing a view towards the movement that is insulting. If there is a genuine concern, it should be questioned. If it’s not genuine, then it’s just a reason to discriminate and exclude. Men need to be inclusive in hiring, in introducing young women to clients, in firm outings, and in setting up panels and conferences.”

When faced with inappropriate remarks and behavior, women should be empowered to speak out and seek advice and support from others. For example, if a client calls you “honey,” let the senior partner know what happened. If the culprit is anyone besides a client, be more direct: “Don’t tolerate it. Tell them it is demeaning. Don’t just let things go. You need to be respected. You may say things that make you uncomfortable, but in the long run, it will solidify your place in your office, with the bar, and pave the way for the next woman attorney.”

When prompted for advice, Justice Vogel offered these guidelines: “Work hard; have a good mentor; be courteous; be honorable; remember you are representing the rights of someone else and it is not about you; this is a profession, not a job; as a woman, assert yourself against any perceived discrimination or harassment; as a man, be an ally, speak up, support women, don’t let discrimination and harassment directed towards a woman or yourself pass, and don’t rely on your male privilege; treat everyone with respect; and above all, have integrity.” ♦