

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.



Susan Leach DeBlasio, Esq.

When asked what initially drove Attorney Susan Leach DeBlasio to pursue a career in the law, she quickly jumped to her love for philosophical discussion and logic. As a child, she fell in love with the law while watching Perry Mason on television with her grandfather. However, her journey to becoming one of Rhode Island's best corporate attorneys is not marked by a clear and direct route.

In 1970, she graduated from Wheaton College in Massachusetts with a major in philosophy and minors in both English and psychology. Although she notes that all three disciplines help her practice today, she initially thought she was going to be a writer focusing on short stories and poems. After graduating, she lived in Italy for six years when, as she put it, "somewhere along the way" she decided that she would apply her skill to the study of law.

When she graduated from Boston University law school in 1979, there were very few women practicing law in Rhode Island. Her first position after law school was as a judicial law clerk with Chief Justice Weisberger, which she notes was "very special." He was a great mentor to her and taught her about "professionalism, civility, scholarship, respect, and how to be a better human being." Those are lessons that she carried

throughout her career. In fact, she is the first and only woman to have received the Ralph P. Semonoff Award for Professionalism from the Rhode Island Bar Association.

After clerking for one year, Attorney DeBlasio started her legal practice in litigation working for one of the largest firms in the state, and after a year, she was drawn to corporate law. She liked the idea of forming a relationship with her clients over many years. However, she faced a lot of resistance entering the field.

The resistance did not come from clients—it was from other attorneys at her firm. At that time "women did not become corporate lawyers," and she only knew of two other women that practiced corporate law in Rhode Island at that time. Many other attorneys at her firm limited her exposure to clients, did not provide the same opportunities that other male attorneys enjoyed, and kept her in the background. She overcame this by working hard, coming up with creative solutions, and asking for the same opportunities provided to her male colleagues.

Contrary to other attorneys at her firm who did not believe women could be corporate lawyers, she did not find resistance to her presence in corporate law from her clients. She learned that as long as she had the opportunity to prove herself to the client, the client had no issues with a woman attorney. She worked to develop her own style, embraced being a woman instead of a "pretend man," and took down the artificial walls—"It was liberating."

When asked how she found the internal fortitude to overcome those who would discourage her, she mentioned that everything she had done in her life was "always a little bit outside of [her] comfort zone." This increased her reach and her ability to be comfortable in many situations. So, when she heard people telling her, "No, that is not a door that is open to women," she felt she had to ask, "Why not?"

One of the first meetings she attended with a senior partner was a big securities transaction with a company that was listed on a national



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stock exchange. Attorney DeBlasio met with the CEO and the Treasurer, as well as some other high ranking officers in the company. At the meeting, she was taking notes when the CEO looked at her and made a comment that made it very clear that he thought she was a secretary and not a practicing attorney at the firm.

After that experience she thought to herself, "This is the challenge. Someday I'll be the senior partner at the table and it won't be a question what role I'm playing." That's when she decided that if she got her MBA, she would at least be able to think like her clients and speak their language. Despite pushback from her peers, she pursued an MBA part-time from Providence College, graduating in 1986, while working full-time as an attorney.

Attorney DeBlasio does believe that "luck" has had a large role in her career. She reflected that, "The harder I work, the luckier I get." That hard work persisted when she left the larger prestigious firm and joined Licht & Semonoff. In fact, Attorney DeBlasio worked through her entire pregnancy, going into labor on a Friday night, and calling early on that Saturday morning to let the office know she would not be coming into work that day. Even though she only took five weeks of leave following the birth of her daughter, plenty of partners at the firm still drove to her house to talk shop while she tried to nurse. That hard work and commitment clearly paid off when the partners at her firm voted to make her a partner even as she was on leave.

One thing that gave her the tools she needed to succeed was finding leadership opportunities. She became active in the Rhode Island Bar Association the day she became an attorney and is still very active with the Bar Association. She immediately joined several committees and worked very hard at those committees. She became editor of the *Bar Journal* and chaired many committees, and eventually became a member of the executive committee, and later, president of the Bar Association. She gained valuable skills in public speaking, new areas of the law, and she

built a strong network—all of which directly translated to her skills that she used in the office. In addition, her work with the Bar Association and rise to leadership gave her further credibility with clients and an opportunity to prove herself. To this day, she continues an active role with the House of Delegates, Lawyers Helping Lawyers, Bar Foundation, IOLTA Grants Committee, and the Real Estate Title Standards & Practices Committee. She believes that being active with the Bar Association is her opportunity to give back professionally—something all lawyers have a responsibility to do.

Through hard work, sacrifice, and a commitment to helping others, Susan Leach DeBlasio has certainly proven herself and set the stage for future female lawyers. Although the legal community has come a far way—she noted it was gratifying when she was no longer referred to as a “woman attorney” and simply as an “attorney”—there is still a long way to go. She encouraged employers to hire qualified women and to give women opportunities to participate: “The opportunity to participate is the greatest gift and is really how we can help the next generation of lawyers learn the skills for the next level. Everyone should be treated fairly and evaluated on his or her own merits, and naturally things will fall into place.” She added, “You are not doing the right thing if you are not doing the right thing in all cases. If you fall down in one area, you fall down in all areas.” As for her advice to young lawyers: “Have a mentor and people you can talk to, give back to the profession, don’t be afraid to ask questions, speak up, be active, say ‘Yes,’ knock on the door, take on the challenge, reach for what you want, step out of your comfort zone, be professional, and demonstrate your value and worth. . . . All you need is one opportunity.” ◇