

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.



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Victoria graciously provided us with a first-person narrative as a part of our series. In providing a somewhat alternative perspective, Victoria's story highlights how advancing equality in the workplace serves the best interest of our profession and our community. 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.

There is a photo that I treasure. It was taken in November 1969 by the Providence Journal. The young college freshman in the photo is in a picket line outside a supermarket in Newport, RI. She is holding a sign that reads "Thanksgiving Without Grapes." That was my first experience with injustice as it was directed at migrant farm workers. I decided then that I wanted to do more than demonstrate. I wanted to become the voice of those who had no voice. That is why I pursued a career in law and why I am honored to be a part of the law, a glorious vocation that enables lawyers to enrich others with the application of law and justice to a myriad of life and business experiences.

I have received many blessings in my life — periods of grace that were pure gifts to me. I do not believe in coincidence, but I do believe in providence and that we are called to do something at a particular season in our life. We may not know why at the time, but sooner or later we



come to a human, if imperfect, understanding as to why.

Upon graduation from law school in June of 1976, I returned home to Rhode Island to practice law. I purposefully decided to return to Rhode Island, in part, because this state held my treasure; all that was dear to me and all that had formed me was in Rhode Island. Margaret Elizabeth Sangster said "[t]here is nothing half so pleasant as coming home again."

A few months after returning home, I was offered the career opportunity of a lifetime which has had a lasting impact on me, my profession and my community. I became the first woman to serve as executive counsel to a governor. The governor was J. Joseph Garrahy, who demonstrated, by word and deed, those qualities essential for my legal career, as well as for my 43 years of public service. Governor Garrahy always upheld the commonality of virtues among all people that transcends race, class and other distinctions that

sometimes separate people from each other.

Being part of Governor Garrahy's cabinet allowed me to participate in historic events in our state's history. While many Rhode Islanders fondly recall the Blizzard of 1978 as an example of his quiet and steady leadership, I remember the tumultuous issues of that time that ushered in a sea of change in so many areas that included: major reforms that led to the closure of the Institute of Mental Health and resulted in the reintegration of residents into the community; improving the deplorable and inhumane conditions at the Adult Correctional Institutions ("ACI") in conjunction with the courageous action taken by the late Judge Pettine and the federal court; and establishing the Department of Environmental Management, the Department of Elderly Affairs, and the Department of Children, Youth and Families. Governor Garrahy, by Executive Order, established the first judicial merit selection process and appointed the state's first African American to the RI Judiciary. He also made history with the appointment of women and minorities to key cabinet positions.

Governor Garrahy inspired me to believe that public service, if entered into only in the utmost of good faith and selflessness, is the crown of any career. I was privileged and honored to be the first woman lawyer to advise a governor and serve my fellow citizens. I am delighted that many women lawyers have served in that role in the ensuing years with great distinction.

Governor Garrahy also appointed me to the RI Parole Board and successive governors, both democrats and republicans, have re-appointed me to the Board. That public service has contributed to the development of my professional reputation in the area of criminal law and procedure. I had the privilege to serve on the other side of the bench as municipal court judge in my hometown. This provided a different and important perspective. I also serve as chair of the RI Health Services Council, the advisory council to the director of the RI Department of Health. That area of public service also helped to establish my

expertise in the area of healthcare.

I believe in the values of servant leadership. The concept of servant leadership is said to be rooted first in China, c.600 B.C., in the words of Lao Tzu who said:

*The greatest leader forgets self
And attends to the development of others.
Good leaders support excellent workers.
Great leaders support the bottom ten percent.
Great leaders know that
The diamond in the rough
Is always found "in the rough."*

Fresh out of law school when I entered public service, I was that "diamond in the rough."

I also believed it was important to become active in the RI Bar and have served in many capacities including as the longest-serving president of the Bar. My theme as president was Servant Leadership. As president, I urged the members of the Bar to believe in the law of love, as Clarence Darrow did, in his closing argument on his defense of Henry Sweet. As lawyers, we are good technicians. But I proposed to the Bar that we have to be more than good legal technicians of the art of law. We must be good people and literally take care of each other. As the data shows, lawyers experience a great deal of second hand trauma in handling a myriad of client matters. As a reminder, we have the highest rate of depression and associated risks of any other profession. We also are distinguished in providing the most hours of pro bono services of all professions. I asked lawyers to join me as a servant leader in caring for each other – to leave a colleague a little bit better than she/he was before you entered the courtroom, the office, the coffee shop or the elevator. Civility is a lesser and included virtue in the greater virtue of what it means to be good. If we are good to each other, civility will take root when we are in the right relationship with one another. I hope that all lawyers agree with me that service to others, and being good to others, in and of itself, is rewarding and good for the spirit.

As president of the Bar, I asked lawyers to join me in seeking "Greater Justice for All" to keep justice accessible for our poorest citizens. I also created the US Armed Forces Legal Services Project. We were the first Bar in the country to do this and we became the model in the country. I was honored when the RI Bar established the Victoria M. Almeida Servant Leader Award at the end of my presidency. I am grateful that my law firm, Adler Pollock & Sheehan ("AP&S") continues to support my public service opportunities and my pro bono contributions for those in need. While I have a vast and diversified civil and criminal practice, my public service experience has provided me with outstanding opportunities to my firm and our clients. AP&S is committed to pro bono matters and some of the most rewarding legal work I do is for those individuals unable to pay for my services.

For those who seek to follow a career path similar to mine, consider public service and become active with the RI Bar for opportunities to hone your leadership skills, be of service to our profession to foster respect and confidence in our Bar and in our judiciary.

I initially returned to RI to practice law because my treasure was here. I have remained because my heart is here as well. ♦