



Ada Sawyer
Centennial Celebration
MEMORIAL BOOKLET

*A compilation of pieces that recognize
the first women lawyers of the
Rhode Island Bar*

Dear Colleagues,

Women's History Month has been observed annually in the month of March in the United States since 1987 and is a celebration of the contributions women have made to American history, culture, and society. In honor of Women's History Month, the Rhode Island Bar Association would like to recognize the significant achievement of Ada L. Sawyer, the first woman to pass the bar exam and be admitted to practice law in Rhode Island.

To commemorate Ada's contributions to the Rhode Island legal profession, the Rhode Island Bar Association, supported by the Women's Bar Association and the Roger Williams University School of Law, had planned to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Ada passing the bar exam in the fall of 2020. Due to COVID restrictions and the worsening pandemic the event was postponed multiple times over the last two years. Bar leadership has decided to cancel the event and instead dedicate a portion of the 2022 Annual Meeting Luncheon to recognizing Ada's achievements. There will also be a table at the event honoring Ada and women's history.

The Ada L. Sawyer Centennial Celebration Memorial Booklet is a compilation of pieces that recognize the first women lawyers of the Rhode Island Bar. The booklet features a series of articles, originally published in the *Bar Journal* and written by attorney Denise Aiken, relating to the life of Ada Sawyer and how she enhanced the status of women in Rhode Island. The booklet also includes all of the past *Rhode Island Women Lawyers* interviews that have been published in the *Journal* and articles detailing the history of women lawyers in our state that have recently been published in other publications. We hope you enjoy learning more about Ada Sawyer's significant achievements and how she opened doors for future women in the law in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,



Lynda L. Laing
President

Ada L. Sawyer: The Providence Portia



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Rhode Island Legal
Services, Inc.

“After consideration, we are of the opinion that the word “person” contained in the rules regulating the admission of attorneys and counselors should be construed to include a woman as well as a man...”

RHODE ISLAND SUPREME
COURT ASSOCIATE JUSTICE
WILLIAM H. SWEETLAND

On September 24, 1920, a Miss Ada L. Sawyer, the personal secretary of Rhode Island Bar Association member Percy Winchester Gardner, sat for the Rhode Island Bar exam. She did so without the benefit of attending college or law school. She was the only woman in the room. Of the 22 people taking the bar exam that day, 12 passed. Among them was Miss Ada Sawyer. The 12 new lawyers were notified in November, and on November 14, 1920, the *Providence Journal* published an article about the first woman lawyer to be admitted to the State's Bar, dubbing Miss Sawyer the “Providence Portia”.

In 1920, when Ada took the Bar exam, many states including Rhode Island still allowed its applicants to read the law. This process entailed spending three years under the tutelage of a Bar member after filing a registration with the Bar Association. Percy W. Gardner was Ada's employer and tutor. However, when Ada went to take the exam, the Board of Bar Examiners balked. After all, the rules stated that any “person” could read the law. Was a woman a person? They required a letter from Supreme Court Associate Justice (and later Chief Judge) William H. Sweetland that *“After consideration, we are of the opinion that the word “person” contained in the rules regulating the admission of attorneys and counselors should be construed to include a woman as well as a man....”* Since Ada L. Sawyer was found to be a person, she could sit for the exam.

Ada Sawyer went to work for Percy Gardner on the day after she graduated from high school in 1909. When she passed the Bar exam, her name went on the door of the Turk's Head Building law firm as Gardner & Sawyer. Percy Gardner and Ada Sawyer still have their names on the door, along with those of Robert Gates and James Sloan, the young attorneys Ada hired in 1953 and 1955.

While her practice centered on corporate matters, banking, trust estates and probate, she recognized the law, and lawyers, were not always kind to women. In an interview with the *Evening Bulletin*, on April 7, 1921, she noted, *“It may be interesting to know that there have been twice as many women as men to consult me; and that those of my own sex who have come to me, not only have evinced confidence in me, but have preferred to talk with a woman rather than a man”*. The reporter asked Miss Sawyer about women serving on juries, for which Judge Hahn considered women unfit. While Ada demurred from giving an opinion because her only trials thus far had been with a judge sitting without a jury, she stated, *“...until I knew more of the workings of the minds of men jurors, I could not compare them with my idea of what women*

might do. As far as their mentality is concerned, however, I think that the average woman compares very favorably with the average man juror.”

By the time Ada Sawyer was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1925, she was the President of the Rhode Island Federation of Women's Clubs, a member of the Women's Republican Club, for which she served as the legal adviser, the Gaspee Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Four Leaf Clover Club, Providence Plantations Club, the Wakefield Area Advisory Board of the Industrial National Bank, and she served as a director of seven Rhode Island corporations. Ada Sawyer was a frequent guest lecturer at area organizations, and, as early as January of 1937, she told the Barrington Unit of the Rhode Island League of Women Voters that the current laws dealing with marriage, divorce, guardianship and property rights were unfair to women, telling them the special commission set up in 1926 to revise the marriage laws had not accomplished anything.

Rhode Island Governor Pothier gave Ada her opportunity to have a greater impact on the law when he named her to the Rhode Island Children's Laws Commission, which served as part of an initiative to reform the Rhode Island Labor laws relating to minors. Miss Sawyer had earlier drafted the bill creating the Commission. During this time, Ada Sawyer and Percy Gardner were trying cases dealing with the banking industry in front of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. While Judge Hahn may not have thought women were fit to serve on a jury, he wrote a dissenting opinion in favor of Miss Sawyer's client in the case of *Gilmore v. Prior*, 52 RI 395, 161 A 137 (1932). However, we have no indication on his feelings about women practicing law. In all, Ada Sawyer brought thirteen cases to the Supreme Court between 1921 and 1959 as either counsel or litigant. The attorneys involved in the related Court decisions read like a Who's Who of Rhode Island practitioners.

Brown University bestowed her with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from in June of 1964 which came with the following citation; *“Your quiet example has inspired others to follow your path and has helped to bring about equality in fact as well as theory. We honor what you represent, and what you have done privately and publicly to serve your clients and your community.”*

Ada Sawyer retired from the world of law in February of 1983. When she died on May 13, 1985, at the age of 93, Rhode Island lost its Providence Portia.

Percy Winchester Gardner: The Man Who Broke the Rule



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Providence, RI

One hundred years ago, in 1917, Percy W. Gardner, Esq. entered the name of A. L. Sawyer with the Board of Bar Examiners to begin the process of becoming an attorney in Rhode Island. The law at the time allowed any person to read the law under the supervision of an attorney in good standing for a period of three years. After three years of study, that person could then register to take the Rhode Island bar examination.

As we all know, when the three years of study was completed, A. L. Sawyer tried to register for the bar exam. It was at that point that the Board of Bar Examiners learned that Sawyer was Ada Lewis Sawyer, a female. They balked.

A decision was required from Supreme Court Justice (and later Chief Judge) William H. Sweetland. He concluded, "After consideration, we are of the opinion that the word 'person' contained in the rules regulating the admission of attorneys and counselors should be construed to include a woman as well as a man."

Since Ada Lewis Sawyer was found to be a "person," she could sit for the bar exam in September 1920.

But today I celebrate the decision of Percy W. Gardner, Esq. His action 100 years ago was not without cost to him. Some in our Bar Association were cold to him in the following years. He was the man who broke the rule. That rule was: "NO GIRLS ALLOWED."



Ada Sawyer: Not Stopping



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Providence, RI

Ada Sawyer's perseverance enabled her to become the state of Rhode Island's first woman lawyer, but that accomplishment did not stop her from continuing to make waves. By the fall of 1924, she was admitted into practice by the US Supreme Court and had become the President of the State Federation of Women's Clubs. In April of 1925, just a few years after passing the Rhode Island bar exam, she was elected as the Secretary of the Children's Laws Commission, with a salary attached in the sum of \$2,500. To put that sum into perspective, a Model-T Ford cost \$850 at that time.

The *Providence Journal* article on April 17, 1925 stated that it was through her interest in laws relating to women and children that a group associated with the Women's Republican Club pushed to have a code commission appointed in Rhode Island. It was our own Ada Sawyer who drafted the bill creating the commission to study the laws in Rhode Island and how they affected children. Governor Aram J. Pothier signed it into law in the spring of 1925 and appointed the nine persons authorized by the act, some of whom went on to make great contributions to Rhode Island's quality of life.

It was just another part of Ms. Sawyer's far-reaching agenda that laid the groundwork for this important commission.



Ada Sawyer, Esq.

The Children's Law Commission 1925

Judge Frederick Rueckert
Dr. Harold S. Bucklin
Joseph M. Tally
Representative George B. Utter
Senator William D. Whitehouse
Mrs. Henry C. Babcock
George B. Arnold
Mrs. John Scannevin
Mrs. Isaac Gerber

Ada Sawyer and the Rhode Island Supreme Court



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Providence, RI

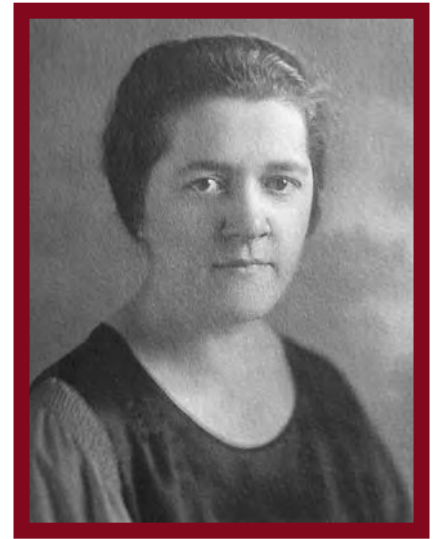
Most of us have become familiar with the fact that Ada Sawyer became the first woman in Rhode Island to become an attorney in the fall of 1920. We may not, however, be aware that Ms. Sawyer and her mentor/partner, Percy Winchester Gardner, were frequently before the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

There were thirteen cases between 1921 and 1959 in which Ms. Gardner was either involved as a representative of a litigant or as a party in her capacity as a trustee or administrator.

A scant few months after passing the Rhode Island bar exam, Mr. Gardner and Ms. Sawyer appeared for some respondents in the case of **R.I. Hospital Trust Co. vs. Herbert C. Calef, et al.** 43 RI 518, 112 A. 787, decided March 16, 1921. That was a request for instructions brought by the trustee on a question of the proper construction of a will and codicil.

Some of the cases brought before the Court read like movie plots, (**Charlotte Remington Hatton vs. Howard Braiding Company et al.**, 47 RI 47, 129 A. 805, decided June 29, 1925) and some are fine points of estate law.

There are thirteen cases in all. And some are still being cited.



Ada Sawyer, Esq.

1. RI HOSPITAL TRUST CO., Admr. and Tr.
vs.
HERBERT C. CALEF, et al.
43 RI 518, 112 A. 787
Decided March 16, 1921
2. CHARLOTTE REMINGTON HATTON
vs.
HOWARD BRADING COMPANY et al.
47 RI 47, 129 A. 805
Decided June 29, 1925
3. PERCY W. GARDNER Ex.
vs.
EDWIN A. KNOWLES et al.,
48 RI 231, 136 A. 883
Decided April 13, 1927
4. PERCY W. GARDNER, Trustee
vs.
CHARLES P. SISSON, Attorney-General
49 RI 504, 144 A. 669
Decided January 21, 1929
5. OLIVE WELLING TIFFANY et al.
vs.
RICHARD H. BABCOCK et al.
51 RI 350, 154 A. 784
Decided May 22, 1931
6. DANIEL O. HAMILTON
vs.
STERLING MOTOR TRUCK CO. OF NEW ENGLAND
52 RI 328, 160 A. 866
Decided June 10, 1932
7. WILLIAM H. GILMORE
vs.
JAMES H. PRIOR, Ex.
52 RI 395, 161 A. 137
Decided June 27, 1932
8. JOHN R. REYNOLDS
vs.
THOMAS E. MARSDEN
60 RI 395, 161 A. 137
Decided February 14, 1938
9. HENRY N. GIRARD
vs.
ADA L. SAWYER, Admx.
d.b.n.c.t.a.
64 RI 48, 9 A.2d 854
Decided December 22, 1939
10. HENRY N. GIRARD
vs.
ADA L. SAWYER, Adm'x.
66 RI 403, 19 A.2d 769
Decided April 28, 1941
11. NARRAGANSETT PIER RAILROAD COMPANY
vs.
LEROY W. PALMER. SAME
CHARLES B. CLARKE
70 RI 298, 38 A. 2d 761
Decided July 14, 1944
12. MABEL L. RITCHIE
vs.
ADA L. SAWYER et al.
75 RI 223, 65 A.2d 458
Decided April 11, 1949
13. ADA L. SAWYER et al., Trustees
vs.
GORDON POTEAT, Adm'r, et al.
90 RI 51, 153 A.2d 541
Decided July 27, 1959

Ada Sawyer: The Power in the Girl



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Providence, RI

We have been reflecting over the past year on the remarkable career of Ada Lewis Sawyer, Rhode Island's first female attorney, as the 100th anniversary of her admission approaches. In 1920, the year she passed the bar examination, Ms. Sawyer was 27 years old. I believe her story truly begins many years prior to that date.

In 1909, the year Ada graduated from high school in a class of 40, she was one of four students awarded an honors diploma for "excellency in studies and deportment." Ada was 17 years old. In 1909 women were still unable to vote nor could they control their property. The Royal Mill, the Jackson Mill, and Quidwick Mill, all in Rhode Island, were still employing children as young as 11 and 12 years old.

In 1909, there were only 1,000 women lawyers in the whole of the United States. (See the article "The Woman's Rebellion" *The Saturday Evening Post*, June 1909)

A girl graduating from high school in 1909, even a very bright girl, had few options. Add to that the fact that Ada L. Sawyer was not the child of privilege, but one of four daughters of a modest working man. There was to be no college or "finishing school" for her. How different when compared to the options open to the daughters of my colleagues.

Three days after her graduation from high school she was hired by Percy W. Gardner, with whom she would work until that man's death in 1955. Today I look at the courage of that 17-year-old girl entering a field not held by her father or other family members. She charted a new course for herself and, ultimately, for all of us women practicing law in Rhode Island.

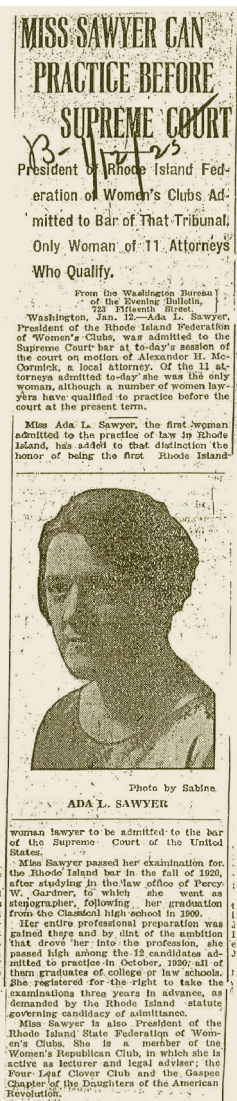


Ada Sawyer, Esq.

Ada L. Sawyer and *The Providence Journal*



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Providence, RI



Back in the summer of 2001, on a whim, I went over to the Providence Journal building to visit their "morgue." It was a wonderful place that I had discovered while in high school. My theory was: if you can't find it in the Encyclopedia Britannica, you can find it at the *ProJo*.

I was interested in Ada Sawyer, and the *ProJo* did not disappoint. They had a fat little envelope chock full of clippings of articles that had appeared in the *Providence Journal* and the *Evening Bulletin*. The clippings were yellow with age and a bit crispy. But I was able to make photostatic copies. The *Providence Journal* had a long relationship with the woman they had dubbed "The Providence Portia."

On November 14, 1920 they ran a three-column article, with a photo, about Miss Ada L. Sawyer passing the bar examination without the benefit of college or law school. She was one of only twelve who passed.

On April 7, 1921 they checked in with Miss Sawyer at her office in the Turk's Head Building and another lengthy article appeared. She was interviewed about the clients that she was able to bring in to the firm because women evinced confidence in her.

On January 12, 1925, the Washington Bureau of the *Evening Bulletin* ran an article announcing that Miss Sawyer, Rhode Island's first female attorney, was admitted to practice before the US Supreme Court. (They ran the article with the same photo that we included with this article.)

Then on April 17, 1925, the *Providence Journal* announced that Miss Sawyer was chosen unanimously to be the secretary of the Children's Law Commission. The article goes on to say that it was through her efforts as head of the State Federation of Women's Clubs and as the drafter of the bill creating the commission and the law signed by Governor Pothier, that the commission was formed.

Articles followed in 1935 and 1937 that painted a picture of Ada Sawyer's involvement in the arenas where law and politics merged.

And on June 1, 1964, the *Providence Journal* staff writer Florence Clement recapped the early career of Miss Sawyer when she received an honorary Doctor of Laws from Brown University. At the age of 72, Ada Sawyer finally put on a cap and gown.



Ada Sawyer, Esq.

Ada L. Sawyer: A Family Woman



Denise C. Aiken, Esq.
Providence, RI

On a warm June evening, a very tall, slim man entered my little cottage in an improbable green jacket. (More on the jacket later) The gentleman was Robert Bateman, the grand nephew of our Ada L. Sawyer.

For the next two hours, I was allowed a window into the family life of Ada Sawyer, RI's first female attorney, that most of us never had the privilege to share.

For 20 years I have written about the plucky young woman who had to be declared a "person" in order to sit for the RI bar exam in 1920 and passed that exam just 3 months after winning the right to vote. I ask myself, who was Ada Sawyer when she was not at her office in the Turk's Head Building.

Bob Bateman painted for me a picture of a woman of "selfless generosity" (his words). Here was a woman who was generous to charity, but wanting no fanfare.

Case in point: She and her sister Bertha Sawyer had a house in Bonnet Shores. It was open to the children and grandchildren of their youngest sister, Clara. But when the house was crowded, Ada bought a smaller house nearby, so that she and Bertha could leave the bigger house for the extended family. Years later, when Ada sold that larger house, she donated the little house to St. Andrew's School – anonymously. She thought it was "fun" to do nice things for other people.

Back in the 1970's, Bob Bateman was a student at Brown University. (Here is where the green jacket comes in). Bob lived on South Angell St. with his great aunts, Ada and Bertha. Each Tuesday he had lunch with Ada at the Turk's Head Club. At that time, and for many years later, gentlemen were required to wear a jacket (suit or sport) to be seated. Ada Sawyer bought her young grand-nephew a sport coat, but kept it in her Turk's Head office to ensure said nephew would always be admitted. To this day, Bob loves that jacket.

And most telling of all: Clara's grandchildren, Bob and his sisters, Pam, Alison, and Carol, thought of Aunt Ada as a second grandmother.

While she may never have married, she left a legacy of family love and she was cherished.



Ada Sawyer, Esq.



Robert Bateman, grand nephew of Ada L. Sawyer, in his sport coat given to him by his great-aunt.

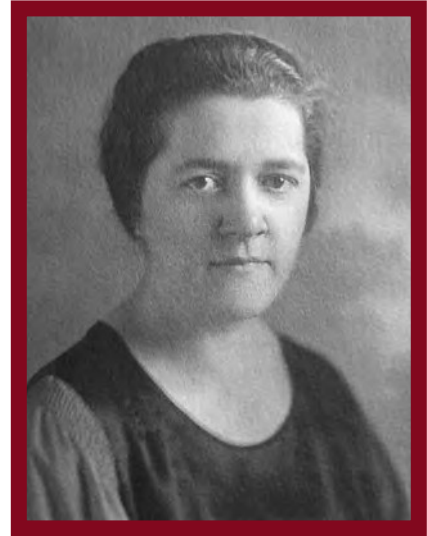
The Ada Sawyer Award: The Rhode Island Women's Bar Association's Recognition of Women Lawyers



Kelly I. McGee, Esq.
Associate General Counsel,
Lifespan, Providence
Past President, Rhode
Island Women's Bar
Association

In 1920, after a three-year court battle, Ada Lewis Sawyer became the first female lawyer in the state of Rhode Island. In Ada Sawyer's case, the Rhode Island Supreme Court ruled that the word "person" in the bar rules, with respect to admission, referred to a woman as well as a man, and Ada Sawyer paved the way for women lawyers in Rhode Island.

Each year the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association (RIWBA) presents the Ada Sawyer Award in recognition of Ada Sawyer's step forward for gender equality. The Ada Sawyer Award recognizes women who exemplify the mission of the RIWBA – the promotion and enhancement of the status of women in our community and in the legal profession. The RIWBA began giving the Ada Sawyer Award in 1995. Those women who have received the Award are not only distinguished in their areas of expertise, but have mentored those women lawyers who came after them.



Ada Sawyer, Esq.

The past recipients of the Ada Sawyer Award are:

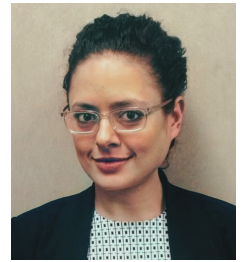
1995 – Barbara Margolis
1996 – Lynette Labinger
1997 – Carolyn Mannis
1998 – Margaret Lynch-Gadaleta
1999 – Margaret Curran
2000 – Justice Alice Gibney
2001 – Marilyn Shannon McConaghy
2002 – Justice Haiganush R. Bedrosian
2003 – Justice Victoria Lederberg
2004 – M. Teresa Paiva-Weed
2005 – Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg
2006 – Stacey Pires-Veroni
2007 – Judge Patricia Moore
2008 – Denise Aiken
2009 – Judge O. Rogerie Thompson
2010 – Tracy Baran
2011 – Justice Sandra A. Lanni
2012 – Patricia R. Recupero
2013 – Barbara Hurst
2014 – Donna Nesselbush
2015 – Melody Alger
2016 – Justice Laureen A. D'Ambra
2017 – Katie Ahern
2018 – Justice Patricia A. Hurst
2019 – Erin Lynch Prata
2020 & 2021 – No honorees

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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Adler, Cohen, Harvey, Wakeman
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Providence City Solicitor's
Office



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

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 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 some-thing. 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." ♦

Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future

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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



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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 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.

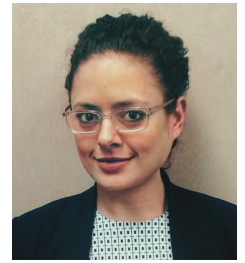
Through hard work, sacrifice, and a commitment to helping others, Susan Leach DeBlasio has certainly proven herself and set the stage for future female lawyers. Although the legal community has come a far way—she noted it was gratifying when she was no longer referred to as a “woman attorney” and simply 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.” ♦

Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future

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Lise J. Gescheidt, Esq.

Like many lawyers of her generation, Lise Gescheidt was inspired to pursue law after watching **Perry Mason**. From the age of 13, she knew she would follow that path. As an only child, she received the support and encouragement she needed to pursue her goal. Leaving Florida to attend Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, she graduated in 1974 with a major in history and a minor in psychology. Hers was the second co-educational graduating class from that institution. Although she was tempted to put her legal career on hold to "bum around" the Greek Islands, she did not waver from her goal and attended Boston College Law School, graduating in 1977.

While in college, she fell in love with Newport, working as a bartender there during her summer breaks. It should be no surprise that while pursuing her goal of becoming a public defender, she volunteered at the Rhode Island Public Defender's Office. Upon graduation, she became an assistant public defender, working with lawyers like Barbara Hurst and Allegra Munson, both of whom were tough women and great teachers.

During her first six months as an assistant public defender, Attorney

Gescheidt worked in the appellate division in an age before computers. While working there, her practice focused on conducting legal research in actual books, drafting briefs, and arguing before the Supreme Court. She also had the opportunity to work on an amicus brief regarding the insanity defense. Women lawyers appearing before the Rhode Island Supreme Court was not unusual in those days, and she generally felt comfortable and accepted in that role. However, once she switched to the trial court, "sexism and the old boy network were rampant."

Some of the instances of sexist behavior could be dismissed as "ignorance," while some perpetrators were "just plain pigs." Groping and unwanted physical contact with women lawyers, their secretaries, and female clerks were common. When she and other women were not victimized by unwanted physical actions, they would be marginalized or ignored. She relayed an occasion where she was the only woman attorney among three male colleagues on trial. When the judge took the bench, he greeted counsel with "Good morning, gentlemen." Opposing counsel could also be patronizing. If you showed emotion as a female attorney, "the men across the aisle would treat you like your hormones were raging." Turning to other women for support was not always a comfort. No one talked about the elephant in the room; you did not want to complain for fear that no one would believe you or that you would be perceived as overly sensitive.

Men who wielded their power outside of the courtroom also stood in opposition to women participating in the criminal justice system. For example, men working for the Department of Corrections blocked women from entering prisons to speak with their clients because they were wearing

underwire bras that set off the metal detectors (while allowing other metal objects, like keys and belt buckles). When women removed their bras in the bathroom before visits, they were blocked again and told that women who did not wear bras could not enter either. Women were also denied entrance to the prison for wearing open-toed shoes or sandals. On one occasion, Attorney Gescheidt was finally allowed into the prison wearing golf spikes because she had no other shoes that were acceptable to the guard.

Attorney Gescheidt worked in the Public Defender's Office for nine years before changing career paths by practicing civil litigation at Adler Pollock & Sheehan. However, the civil bar was not any more welcoming of a female practitioner than in the criminal bar. Other attorneys would talk down to her and called her "deary." Further, clients openly objected to being represented by a "woman lawyer."

After eighteen months practicing civil law, she decided to leave and return to practicing criminal law. She took a "beach leave" of several months before starting her own practice, and later became a partner in MacFadyen, Gescheidt & O'Brien. Attorney Gescheidt spent the rest of her career working as a private criminal defense attorney where she represented both paying and court-appointed clients in serious criminal cases, abuse and neglect cases in Family Court, and in front of the Parole Board. After spending forty-one years practicing law, she recently assumed semi-retirement status and became a practicing farmer and horticulturalist.

Being a woman lawyer was challenging in the beginning of her career. She worked hard to gain self-confidence while learning the subtleties of the law and the art of persuasion, not to mention the management of staggering

caseloads – “It was terrifying as a young lawyer, not knowing anything.” In addition to this, she had to navigate a sexist and patronizing legal system. Attorney Gescheidt “worked her ass off,” had supportive mentors, and gave back to the profession through her work on committees. She also “went out for a beer” with her colleagues and developed strong personal relationships with opposing counsel. On one occasion after a judge had been “very nasty” to her in chambers, opposing counsel, a male attorney, called her just to tell her he was sorry that she was treated in that manner and that she did nothing to deserve it. Through it all, you have to “...go in, roll with it, and give it the best you can do. Being a lawyer is a lot of work, sacrifice, and fun.”

Although she “played the game” to do what was best for her clients, putting up with the demands of criminal defense work wore on her. She observed that the legal profession has changed over time, raising a question as to whether it is still an honorable profession. She is disappointed to see how lawyers disrespect other lawyers, their clients, as well as the Court. She also sees how the Court can disrespect lawyers as well. “Some of it may be insecurity or a need to exert control over a system that is out of control,” she postulated. She would like to see lawyers and judges acting like “real people guided by their conscience, not [by their] ego or fear of negative press coverage....Some people with no experiential basis should not be making judgments about people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Ultimately, whatever role you assume in this human drama called justice, you have to look yourself in the mirror, like yourself, and feel good about the work you do. You look back at your life, and you can’t get those years back.” She also advised to “be yourself, wear the clothes that make you comfortable – whether it is cowboy boots or a shirt with a bowtie – and consider smelling the roses while you still have a sense of smell.”

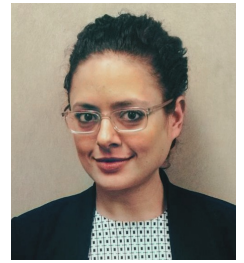
As for working to continue to overcome sexism, “You have to look at each other as individuals, not based on sex. We are all in this together, and we have to be supportive of and kind to each other.” ♦

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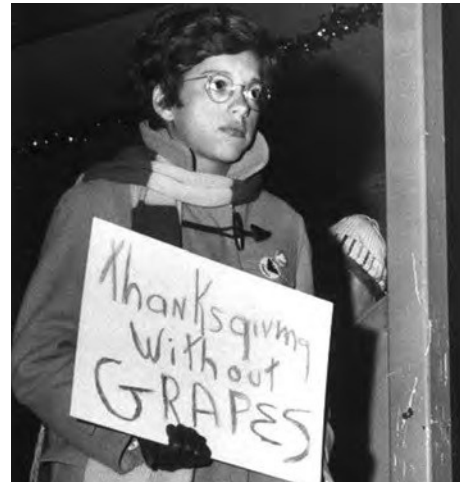


Victoria M. Almeida, Esq.

Victoria graciously provided us with a first-person narrative as a part of our series. In providing a some-what 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.

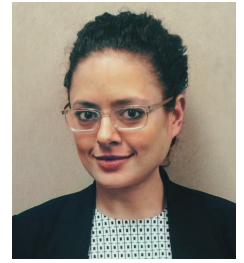
I initially returned to RI to practice law because my treasure was here. I have remained because my heart is here as well. ♦

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Lise Iwon, Esq. (left) Peg Laurence, Esq. (right)

I wanted to change the world and help those in need," explained Lise Iwon when describing why she left her job as a teacher in Wisconsin to attend law school in New Hampshire. As a 1L at the Franklin Pierce Law Center, she met Margaret "Peg" Laurence, who later became her partner in life and in law. Together, they were committed to leading their lives in the pursuit of helping others.

After law school, Peg and Lise founded Laurence & Iwon in Wakefield, RI. While Peg worked primarily in real estate law, Lise focused on family law, working at times as a court-appointed advocate for abused or neglected children and working for the American Civil Liberties Union ("ACLU").

As a lesbian litigator, Lise bore witness to shocking incidents of unconscionable behavior performed by members of our bar.

In one case where she sought a restraining order on behalf of her client, opposing counsel requested a chambers conference. Lise had never participated in a chambers conference, but was appalled when opposing counsel alleged that Lise's client was performing sexual services for money. Lise clarified for the judge that the statement was untrue and said, "If this is how chambers conferences go, I am

walking out," which she did. Outside of chambers, opposing counsel confronted her about why she left. She explained that he had lied to the judge—to which he then threatened her, saying Lise should "watch her back."

During another chambers conference held to discuss an agreed-upon dismissal of a traffic ticket, a judge, while smoking a cigar, ordered Lise to spit out her mint because he "hated the scent of mint." He stated he recognized her as working with the ACLU and "marching in a gay pride parade." He revealed troubling prejudice as he went on to tell her that since gay people do not belong on this planet, he should be able to kill them if he wanted to. He also told her that babies of gay couples should not be able to be born. Despite the judge functionally telling Lise that he thought he should be able to kill her, she attempted to break the tension stating, "Well, it is a good thing we are not in the same family, as our holiday dinners would be tense." After leaving chambers, the prosecuting police officer and her client (also a lawyer) urged her to file a complaint. She felt that she could not because she had to practice before that judge.

In yet another chambers conference, it was very clear the judge and opposing counsel were very close, as they chatted about recent parties, dinners, and extracurricular activities they and their family did together. The judge then looked to Lise and said, "Okay honey, what is your case about?" Lise explained her case, which was a straightforward constitutional infringement matter supported by the law. The judge asked opposing counsel his thoughts, who simply said he disagreed, and the judge agreed and dismissed her case. Lise questioned the "old boys club" system, where practicing law was more about who you knew and not about the law.

"I went to law school for this?" she thought, though she was not deterred. In fact, this made her want to do more. "I like to make things happen."

Eventually, Lise did encounter some behavior that was so appalling that she felt compelled to file complaints with disciplinary counsel—one against an attorney and another against a judge. Lise noted that "they were scary times" for her as those complaints wove their way through the system. The investigation of the attorney (who was ultimately suspended) took years, during which time Lise had to continue to practice against the attorney, who would speak ill of her among the bar and threaten her. During the investigation, however, she could not respond to his negative comments or even defend herself.

As to the complaint filed against the judge, many members of the bar thanked her for being the one to finally step up and intervene with such a concerning figure. The judge was ultimately removed from the bench.

She found the strength to fight injustice in the bar due to the unconditional love and support of her wife: "I could not have done it without Peg. She is the one who made it all possible." In addition to the support from Peg, Lise added, "You need a village of love," reflecting that one of the best things she did while practicing was to start a small group of women lawyers who met one time per month to share information and practice tips.

Lise's work paid off for the advancement of her clients and the Rhode Island bar. She has been recognized and honored with two awards from the American Bar Association. In 1996, she was awarded with the Pro Bono Publico Award, and, in 2015, she was awarded the Stonewall

Award, recognizing lawyers who have considerably advanced lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in the legal profession and successfully championed LGBT legal causes. In addition to her national recognitions, she was the first lesbian president of the Rhode Island Bar Association and gained the bar's support for same-sex marriage before the Marriage Equality Act. She also won a declaratory ruling for same-sex couples in Rhode Island to take the same marital deductions for estate taxes.

Although Lise retired from the practice of law in 2015, she continues to change the world and make things happen. She serves on twelve boards and organizes fundraisers, including the "Duffle Bag Bash," an event that collects duffel bags to donate to children in foster care so they no longer have to transport their possessions in trash bags.

Like others, Lise echoes concerns of the evolution of the legal profession; she has observed increasing disrespect and decreased civility due to unreasonable expectations and entitlement. She encourages all lawyers to get involved with the Bar Association and all lawyers, including those who are retired, to give back. "You meet a lot of other lawyers who want to support you, mentor you, and improve the profession. It is inspirational when you help lift the profession and the community."

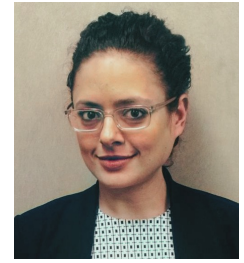
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The Honorable Mary M. Lisi

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 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.”

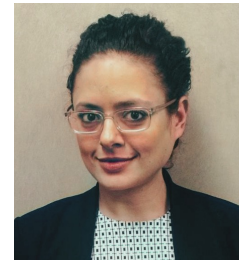
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Barbara Margolis, Esq.

Upon graduating from the University of Rhode Island in 1977 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in psychology, Barbara Margolis, now retired Deputy Disciplinary Counsel, knew she wanted to make the world a better place. She initially thought she would pursue her goal by becoming a feminist therapist. Her mother guided her toward attending law school, encouraging Attorney Margolis to pursue something that would help her gain more "power" to represent and advocate for those who needed help.

Although originally from Utica, New York, she attended New England School of Law part-time while working full-time. As she worked her way through law school, she volunteered with Merrimack Valley Legal Services and represented victims of abuse seeking divorces. She also spent time working as a messenger at a law firm with ten attorneys, where the gender double-standard was alive and well. Although she and another law student (a male) were both hired at the same time, she was tasked as a messenger, while the male student was tasked with work befitting an individual pursuing a legal education. That discrim-

ination did not dissuade or discourage Attorney Margolis as she never intended to pursue a "big law" career.

Upon graduation, she immediately sought out non-profit work in Rhode Island. However, due to budget cuts implemented by President Regan, legal aid services throughout the country were significantly reduced and full-time legal aid positions were not available.

With no clients and no connections in Rhode Island (beyond her college education) she thought to herself, "What's the worst that could happen?" and chose to hang her shingle as a solo practitioner in family law. She found an office space for rent from two male attorneys in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. As a condition for her renting that space, she was asked to promise not to "do abortions" (or, rather, litigate any issues relating to abortion). After settling in, she began reaching out to the community to offer her legal services. She contacted several nonprofit organizations to offer her services and determine what she could do to fulfill the need of the people in the State.

After a while, she discovered that she was spending most of her time practicing in South County, so she left her space in Pawtucket and opened a solo practice there. She was later joined by Lise Iwon and Margaret Laurence. They worked together for a while until Attorneys Iwon and Laurence split into their own firm—at which time Attorney Margolis picked up part-time work at the Legal Aid Society of Rhode Island. She eventually closed her private practice and worked full-time for the Legal Aid Society, ultimately becoming its chief legal counsel—a position that she held from 1989 to 1995.

As chief legal counsel, she worked tirelessly to ensure that her team worked tirelessly. She reflected that the

work was rewarding but exhausting. During that time she was very involved in several legal organizations, including the Rhode Island Bar Association House of Delegates. She was also part of the efforts to combine the Coalition of Women Lawyers and the Women Lawyers Association, which later became the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association. She was joined in these efforts by the Honorable Florence K. Murray, the first female Associate Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. Justice Murray later nominated Attorney Margolis to the Rhode Island Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel. She recalls the female judges and justices in Rhode Island had their eyes out to support women, and Attorney Margolis encourages all women to continue in this tradition—"Women have to take care of each other." For example, "Always write letters of support for one another."

She also organized an informal group of gay lawyers to provide support for one another—the "630 Club" (named after the time they met)—and, in collaboration with other female attorneys living openly, started the LGBT committee of the Rhode Island Bar, which initially focused on educating the bar on issues important to the LGBTQ community.

It was her work with the Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel that first brought her to the judiciary's attention in an ethics-related role. When the Honorable Mary Lisi left her role as Chief Disciplinary Counsel for the Supreme Court of Rhode Island to become a District Judge for the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island, Attorney Margolis applied for, and became, Deputy Disciplinary Counsel for the Supreme Court of Rhode Island—a position in which she has

served for more than twenty-five years.

In reflecting upon her career and her work as Deputy Disciplinary Counsel, she had plenty of advice on how to be a good legal practitioner. Fundamentally, do good work and always have the law on your side. "It's not magic. Know the law, and people respect that. I was always clear and direct; when billing by the hour and advocating for clients, you don't play games. To some practitioners, every 'battle' is personal and 'winning is everything.' But, doing your job well, being able to advocate on behalf of someone, and having the respect of your peers—that's winning. There's no need to throw firebombs or make personal attacks." She later added, "One of our greatest faults as lawyers is that we do not like to be wrong or told what to do. Be aware of this and help others be aware of this."

Attorney Margolis certainly encountered barriers throughout her career, including sexist behavior from other practitioners and court staff. She fought through those barriers and earned the respect of her peers by always coming to court prepared and unafraid to try a case. For those facing inequality or confronting barriers simply because they are perceived as different, she noted: "If your good work is not recognized, move on. There needs to be a partnership, and there needs to be equality. Be willing to leave." For those who witness inequality, she urged: "It is all of our responsibility. If you see something, say something. We have to talk about it, and we have to address it. It is about standing up for yourself and helping others stand up for themselves." She also advised, "Take a step back. Sometimes, a person may have no idea they hurt you or offended you. Tell them how they made you feel and ask how they felt. Give them an opportunity to learn and to rise above."

As Deputy Disciplinary Counsel, some common issues she has had to address include instances of attorneys who do not return calls from opposing counsel or their own clients, or those who make exaggerated statements or adopt statements in pleadings without much, or any, research. Some may think they are serving their client with speed or competition, but that is not the case. Opposing counsel may go to court to strike the statements—or even seek sanctions. "It is a big bar, but people learn of your reputation, skills, and how easy you are to deal with by word of mouth. Try to respect all people, even though it may not always be easy, and say it with a smile."

Another piece of advice: "Things go back around and around, and the energy you put out comes back. Walk in the world you want to be in. Instead of pounding your head against the wall for change you cannot make, focus your energy into the things you can control."

She also noted the importance of participating in the legal community as a means to grow, develop, and find support. Contributing to a community of support was incredibly important and helpful to her. "Be an open person, network, and participate in the bar; it is an opportunity to

meet on a social level and gain support. Be willing to talk about who you are and be authentic. That's all you have."

Attorney Margolis built her own community of strong women (about sixty!) who are not all lawyers and still connect on a monthly basis to provide support and advice. These women, as well as her wife Colleen, gave her the strength to overcome the difficulties faced by our profession and the confidence to take risks. She hopes that others can find the resources to do the same and that women will continue to mentor and raise women up.

"What we do is hard. People need to take care of themselves. Find a community, whatever it is—for some that may be a 5:00 a.m. spin class; take a break; recognize our career is hard; and try not to go it alone." Attorney Margolis commented that she sees a lot of lawyers with self-imposed disabilities: "Case selection is very important. Don't put yourself in a position you hate, and if you find yourself in that position, change. Lawyers are very good at hiding things and hiding from ourselves. There is a lot of ego involved in being a lawyer, so many do not ask for help. But being able to ask for advice is a strength."

She reminds and encourages lawyers to reach out to the confidential Lawyers Helping Lawyers Committee of the RI Bar Association by visiting the Bar's website at ribar.com and clicking the **Do You Need Confidential Assistance** quick link, as well as the Ethics Committee and the Office of Disciplinary Counsel. "We know what it is like out there. It is better to be proactive. Ask."

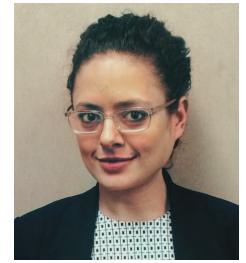
If you are interested in sharing your story or know someone who is, please contact Cassandra L. Feeney at cfeeney@adlercohen.com and/or Etie-Lee Schaub at etieschaub@gmail.com. ♦

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.



Cassandra L. Feeney, Esq.
Adler, Cohen, Harvey, Wakeman
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Etie-Lee Schaub, Esq.
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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").

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



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

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 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."

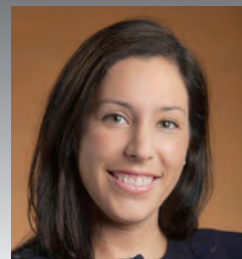
If you are interested in sharing your story or know someone who is, please contact Cassandra L. Feeney at cfeeney@adlercohen.com and/or Etie-Lee Schaub at etieschaub@gmail.com.

Lunch with Legends:

Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



Stephen Adams, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence



Jenna R. Trott, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence

Constance “Connie” Howes grew up in North Canton, Ohio, formally the home of the Hoover Vacuum Cleaner Company. She graduated from Kenyon College and went on to obtain her law degree from the University of Virginia after being inspired by her father, an attorney, and later by her mother, a CPA, who graduated law school in her mid-60s after raising six children. Attorney Howes was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar in 1978 and went to work for Tillinghast, Collins and Graham, where she became a partner. In 1995, she left the firm to join Women and Infants Hospital as general counsel and eventually became the President and CEO and then the Executive Vice President for Women’s Health for Care New England.

Excerpts from our conversation with this trailblazing attorney follow:

Please describe a really memorable experience that you had as a lawyer.

I did a lot of corporate and securities work and very much enjoyed the pressure around closing a deal, working crazy hours to get the parties to agree and get it all wrapped up. I remember one time, literally, in the middle of the night negotiating a deal – my fellow attorney was divorced from the attorney on the other side. And all of a sudden, I realized that the negotiation wasn’t about our client at all. And I said, I am going to go in the other room for a half-hour, and I’ll be back, and I just let them work it out a little bit.

What was your most inventive legal argument?

You know, it’s funny, I practiced law for 20 years and then I totally switched careers. If you have been doing something for 20 years, you have a lot of confidence in what you do. Then to go into a totally different field is extremely unsettling. I went to Women and Infants as general counsel, and when I became first the chief operating officer and later the CEO, I quickly realized that the skills that you have as a lawyer might not work in a business setting. You can’t be sitting there taking notes because you are disengaging when you are doing that. You can’t negotiate the way you can in a business setting, where you weigh the leverage on each side and you go for the jugular, because you have to preserve the relationship, and you want to be able to have those people come out of it, feeling respected and heard, and that is not something that lawyers are trained for. I quickly

realized, wow, all of these tools I have been using, I’ll put them on the shelf and go back to square one. So that was my reinvention, going from being a lawyer to being in an administrative and leadership position in a hospital setting.

Who were your mentors when you started practicing law?

I had a lot of mentors. Louise Durfee was definitely a mentor. An attorney who’s since died, Ed Bennett, was a mentor. Tom Parris, who was the prior president of Women and Infants Hospital, took a huge leap of faith and put me in as chief operating officer. There was another attorney, Alfred Stapleton, who, if you could design somebody who’s the opposite of me, you would have picked Alfred Stapleton. But he entrusted his clients to me, as he was getting ready to retire. Having those people look out for you is really a great blessing. I say to people now, any time somebody asks to meet with you, to be counseled by you, say yes. One of the great pleasures of my life is to work with

people who are young and help them out a little bit, give them a little advice and watch them flourish. It’s a wonderful thing to help someone progress in their career.

What advice would you give to somebody who is just getting out of law school?

When somebody asks you to do something, say yes, and get involved in the community, because that is a tremendous source of pleasure. As a very young lawyer – this shows you how far back this goes – as a very new lawyer, a group of women formed the Coalition of Women Lawyers, because we tried to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed.

Would you do this all over again?

Yes, I would. I have to say this, that what a gift it is to really actively practice law for 20 years, then for 20 years be a hospital administrator.



Constance Howes, Esq.

Lunch with Legends:

Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



Stephen Adams, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence



Jenna R. Trott, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence

Marilyn McConaghy was born and raised in Pawtucket and currently lives less than a mile from her childhood home, which gives her major Rhode Island points. Attorney McConaghy graduated from Tolman High School in 1971 and subsequently graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a double major in speech pathology and education. She graduated from Boston College Law School in 1978. After a clerkship in the Federal Court for Judge Boyle, Attorney McConaghy joined Tillinghast, Collins and Graham, where she became a partner and worked for a total of over eighteen years before becoming the director of the Department of Business Regulations and subsequently head of legal services for the Department of Revenue. Although Attorney McConaghy believes she has “flown under the radar,” she attributes her lasting success to being a “plugger” and having a good sense of balance between work and home.



Marilyn McConaghy, Esq.

Excerpts from our conversation with this trailblazing attorney follow:

What made you decide to become a lawyer?

When I was a senior at URI, I was student teaching, and I soon realized, unless you had a halo and wings, teaching was not the profession for you. One of my friends had an LSAT book, and I said, what is an LSAT? But I took the test, did fairly well I guess, and ended up at BC. So, it's just this thread of – I feel like I am on this little river and on an inner tube, and I'm following along, and that is where I ended up.

Please describe a really memorable experience that you had as a lawyer.

When I was at the Department of Business Regulation, we had a series of institutions that either failed or withdrew from the state or had to be put in administrative supervision, so the first one was Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, then Tuft's Health Plan, and then Pawtucket Mutual Insurance Company. Twin River went into bankruptcy, and Central Falls went under state control under the Fiscal Stability Act. So this was an unrealistic series of events that were closely related, but they all had to do with a failure of some type in an administrative or regulatory context. A lot of them were just cutting edge in terms of what legally should happen to these entities.

What was your most inventive legal argument?

Yes, I would have to say it was the evolution of the Fiscal Stability Act. We had to make that argument on two fronts. We had to go into Superior Court before Judge Silverstein when Central Falls' petition was pending and argue that it shouldn't be there. Then, we had to make the legal argument before the legislature that the Act was the most appropriate mechanism to assure that municipalities continue to be fiscally solvent and had a resource to go to, in the event that they were experiencing fiscal difficulties.

Mentors?

Louise Durfee. She was a partner at Tillinghast when I first went there, and she and I developed a very great friendship over the years, and I still talk to her. You could go to her with anything, and she was just very, very down to earth, practical, and smart. She was admitted to the bar long before being admitted to the bar was something women aspired to, so I would say, she was my biggest mentor. Connie Howes is my best friend. She was at Tillinghast the same time I was, for a number of years, before she went over to Women and Infants, and I found that having somebody just to talk through things with was also very valuable. I forgot about Barry Hittner. It's been a long time since I worked for him, but he was great to work for in terms of regulatory and administrative law. Judge Boyle, of course, was just a wonder. He was great, a great mentor, too, so I have to add those two to the mix.

What advice would you give to somebody who is just getting out of law school?

To be patient. Being good at this profession is one of those things that's going to take time. It's like building a house, you have to dig out that cellar, put in the foundation and then build it, floor by floor.

Would you do this all over again?

Oh, absolutely. I just think the variety that I've been able to experience in my career has just been amazing. Going from a clerkship to private practice to regulatory work in multiple agencies, with the variety of work and challenge that it has allowed me to have is just amazing.

Lunch with Legends:

Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



Stephen Adams, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence



Jenna R. Trott, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence

Arlene Violet grew up near Plain and Dudley streets in South Providence, where her father was a city alderman, and she joked, “you either became a priest, a nun, or a criminal.” She graduated from St. Xavier High School in 1961, joined the Sisters of Mercy, and thereafter got her undergraduate degree from Salve Regina University. She worked in the inner city after becoming a nun, working to address discrimination in housing and helping victims of crime. Her experiences led her to Boston College Law School to fulfill what the Sisters of Mercy called “the unmet need.” She was admitted to the bar in 1974 and clerked for the Honorable Thomas Paolino of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. She went into private practice after clerking and continued to serve the under-represented population she had served as a community organizer. In 1984, Ms. Violet became the first female elected state attorney general in the nation. In addition to her weekly column and a host of other pursuits, she continues to represent clients on a number of different matters, including toxic tort matters and, interestingly, a pension case against the bishop.



Arlene M. Violet, Esq.

Excerpts from our conversation with this trailblazing attorney follow.

Why law school?

Before law school, I lived in the Hartford Avenue Housing Project with four other nuns. I primarily did inner city work as a nun which was, in a way, my motive for wanting to go to law school, because people were telling me that “x” was the law, so something couldn’t be done for poor folk, and I wanted to know, was that true, and if it was, how could I change it. In my neighborhood, these people would work as clerks in a drugstore or something and then they’d go take time out of work and go to court four or five times, if they had been victimized, and then, the sixth time, they would be told, “oh, the case is all settled. It was a plea bargain.” And it further re-victimized them, because they had no say, and I said, we’ve got to get victims’ rights for those folks. And that lead me to law school to change some of the things I was seeing.

How did that work affect your career as AG?

When I became attorney general, part of the motivation for some of the programs I put in place was what I had seen in my neighborhood. For example, I was very, very cautious, when I was AG, about making sure what the evidence was relative to prosecutions, for everybody, but particularly, because I saw what was happening in the neighborhood with people who were innocent but actually presumed guilty. So when I was AG, I said, if you were going to use a confession, I wanted it taped from start to end with no interruptions.

What was your most inventive or creative legal argument?

My clients were living in a neighborhood near a landfill where they were dumping chemicals, and the smell was terrible. So, among my five clients I was representing in the lawsuit, one had his bees die. So, the law was, you had to actually step on the property for trespass. So I used the Trespass Theory, that molecules could be an element. And therefore, it killed the bees, you know, and I won. I was able to show that by polluting the neighborhood, and killing one of my client’s bees, the chemicals were a trespass. I remember arguing to the Judge, “How can you say it’s not trespass? You smell it, don’t you? Would you like to come, your Honor, come and see? And he said, no, no, no, I am taking your word for it.”

Some of your views didn’t always go over well with the status quo, right?

Oh, no kidding. When I was AG, there was a list of restaurants that I told my prosecutors and everybody in the office they couldn’t go to. Two of the restaurants had nothing to do with anything other than the fact that we had undercover drug operations there, so they were on the list. But the other eight really were owned by the mob, and the prosecutors thought nothing of going in and having their tab picked up for drinks after work, or, you know, a date. They would go over and wouldn’t have to pay so I did this edict that you can’t go. The General Assembly was up in arms on the basis that I shouldn’t tell people what they can do after they’re out of work. And I said they’re prosecutors 24-7. It really was like the Wild Wild West.

Lunch with Legends:

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Stephen Adams, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence



Jenna Pingitore, Esq.

Lynette Labinger grew up in Los Angeles. She came east for college, attending Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts. After graduating from NYU Law School in 1974, she came to Rhode Island to clerk for Chief Judge Raymond Pettine of the United States District Court. She did not intend to stay after the clerkship, but she and her husband fell in love with Rhode Island so they decided to stay after the two-year clerkship. Lynette's first job after the clerkship was with Abedon, Stanzler & Biener, working primarily with the late Milton Stanzler on a number of civil rights cases. The firm disbanded when former Attorney General Julius Michaelson, then a member of the firm, ran for U.S. Senate against John Chafee. Lynette decided to become partners with John Roney on January 1, 1983. Initially, the firm included famed criminal attorney Bob Mann. Bob went out on his own, but she and John have remained law partners for nearly 35 years. Lynette has handled some of the state's most significant civil rights cases, and continues to take on these challenging and profoundly rewarding cases to this day. We had the opportunity to speak with this forty-plus-year veteran of the Rhode Island Bar. Excerpts from our conversation follow.



Lynette Labinger, Esq.

Why go to law school?

My brother and I were the first to graduate in my family. My father put in a couple of years and then went into World War II. My last full year of college at Mount Holyoke was the year of all the student strikes involving Vietnam. And I had been studying Russian history. So this was very different to be involved in politics, in current events. The law seems to be one of the ways that one deals with objecting to what is going on and trying to effectuate social change. A lot of lawyers were involved in that. So I kind of moved from "I don't know what I want to do so I can go to law school" to saying that this is something that could be a vehicle to do something fulfilling. And starting with the first year of law school, one of the words that was really significant to at least me was relevance. Not the way you think of it as relevant evidence, but does this actually have any meaning or relevance or importance to what is happening to people today?

What is your most memorable case or experience?

The Title IX case. Title IX, the education amendments, were originally passed to address the fact that a lot of colleges and universities discriminated against women in their graduate pro-

grams. Women couldn't get into medical school, or there were quotas. It is a spending law that says that no educational institution that receives federal funding shall discriminate on the basis of gender. There was a big groundswell by the powerhouse [colleges], because they got so much money at the schools where there were big sports programs which were all out of proportion

to what the women's programs were, which were either usually run on a shoestring or they had to find people who would do bake sales and provide their own transportation. That kind of stuff. They'd have hand-me-down equipment, volunteer coaches. Then you'd have football. And Brown decided that they needed to cut back everywhere and sports teams were eliminated. The students who were affected by it all protested. They were redirected to what was then called Trial Lawyers for Public Justice, who worked with local counsel, and somehow they were given my name. We first had a trial on a preliminary injunction – it basically has to do with the participation opportunities for women versus men.

And we got our preliminary injunction ordering that two teams be reinstated. Brown took an emergency appeal and we all had a week to file our briefs in the First Circuit on an issue of first impression. I remember I had dial-up AOL. And it's like, you didn't attach a big file to something, so you sent discs by FedEx overnight. And you got that, and then you're on the phone and you're faxing pages back and forth and writing on them and trying to do this on the weekends. That's what we did. That was what that was like. We got a great decision and Brown appealed and then filed a petition for certiorari. That was denied.

And that was, I think, a fairly watershed moment, because, you know, knock on wood, that was pretty much the last of the real big assaults on Title IX. Since that time, Brown made golf co-ed. And they now have men's and women's golf. They added equestrian, which could be co-ed, but it's basically all women. And the latest one is women's rugby. And no women's team has been cut in all this time. And the number of women participating has gone up, and the number of men's teams, whether they're less large than they were before, that may be. But, I think it's been very successful.

What is the best advice you ever got?

One of the things I was told early on, it was Rhode Island advice, which is just assume that everything you say will be on the front page of the *Providence Journal*.

Lunch with Legends:

Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



Matthew R. Plain, Esq.



Stephen Adams, Esq.

Barton Gilman LLP, Providence

Amy R. Tabor was born in Chicago in 1949. She moved to Rhode Island when she was nine and her father joined the Economics Department at the University of Rhode Island. She graduated from South Kingstown High School, and then attended the London School of Economics for a year. Amy then attended the University of Michigan, where she majored in history and minored in economics. Upon graduation from college, she moved to Boston and began work at Massachusetts Halfway House, Inc., an organization providing services to individuals released from prison. After one year with the organization, Amy began law school at Northeastern University. She graduated in 1975, passed the bar in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and then joined the firm, McKinnon and Fortunato. At McKinnon and Fortunato, she handled primarily criminal defense and civil rights cases, and worked on a number of civil liberties cases with Steve Fortunato on behalf of the ACLU. Amy left the firm in 1981, and joined another industry leader in criminal defense and civil rights, Mann and Roney. She spent roughly three years practicing at Mann and Roney before going out on her own. While on her own, she initially focused on employment discrimination and family law, and served as a cooperating attorney with the ACLU. In the late 1980s, Amy's practice shifted, and she immersed herself in special education law, her current specialty. We had the opportunity to speak with this forty-plus-year veteran of the Rhode Island Bar. Excerpts from our conversation follow.



Amy R. Tabor, Esq.

What made you decide to become a lawyer?

Like many people during that time, it was a real sense of idealism, the idea that the law could be one tool to help change the world for the better.

Please describe a really memorable experience that you had as a lawyer.

Two cases always stand out in my mind — one of them was the class action lawsuit against the Rhode Island Truancy System, and Tom Lyons and I were the two Rhode Island attorneys. The Rhode Island Family Court had created a truancy program and magistrates were sent into any school system that agreed to have a magistrate. The idea was a great one. What happened over time was that more and more children were being brought into the truancy system.

And I think one of the lessons I learned from this case included how important due process rights really are and what the difference is between fundamentally fair proceedings and Star Chamber-like, secretive proceedings, and how wonderful that aspect of the American legal system is, that normally we do have due process; normally the courts are open to the public, and people can know what's going on. The other thing I learned, or I relearned, was the importance of freedom of the press. God bless the First Amendment. When we brought the class-action lawsuit the press became very interested. There was extensive coverage in the Providence Journal and elsewhere, and that media coverage finally exposed the abuses that the system was committing.

And the other one, the other very significant case, was one of my most memorable experiences. I was advisory counsel to two groups of plowshares protestors, and these were individuals who were basically engaged in civil disobedience in efforts to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

To what do you attribute your success as a lawyer?

Well, to the extent I've achieved success, it's probably stubbornness. Determination to just keep pushing, keep investigating. I am very surprised at how tenacious I can be. I don't see myself as a stubborn or tenacious person, but when I'm working on one of these cases, something kicks in.

What's the best advice you ever got?

Probably from my father. I think I was about 14 years old, and I was feeling mokey and fed up with the world, and I made some whiny comment in the back seat of the car. And I think he had it up to here with my whininess, and with a great deal of impatience he just said, "Well, you can either try to do something to change things or you can just sit on your ass."

What advice would you give to somebody who is just getting out of law school?

I think maybe the basic, the most important advice I would give to new lawyers is to look carefully with your client or potential client at whether this is a battle that is worth taking on or whether this is a battle that it makes more sense to walk away from and get on with your life.

Lunch with Legends:

Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



Matthew R. Plain, Esq.
Barton Gilman LLP, Providence



Elizabeth R. Merritt, Esq.

Lise Gescheidt was born on Staten Island, New York on October 15, 1952. She spent most of her childhood in New York, but moved to Florida during high school, graduating from the Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale. Venturing back north after high school, she graduated from Trinity College in 1974 with a major in History and a minor in Psychology. Inspired by her father's service as a New York police officer, the popularity of the Perry Mason television series during her formative years, and the drama, suspense, and humanity of criminal law, she attended Boston College Law School, graduating in 1977, and beginning her career as a public defender in January of 1978. She worked under the stewardship of the Rhode Island Public Defender, William Reilly, whom she describes as "a man who was like my second father, [a] wonderful person...a real role model for me." She spent nine years at the Public Defender's office before beginning private practice in 1986. After a brief stint at Adler Pollock & Sheehan, she partnered with other notable criminal defense attorneys, Terry MacFadyen and Leonard O'Brien. Over the course of her thirty-seven-year career, she has handled over one hundred jury trials and countless bench trials. Excerpts from our conversation with this veteran of the Rhode Island Bar, and Rhode Island Public Defender Hall-of-Famer follow.

What has been your most memorable experience in the course of your law practice? One of the most interesting was the Block Island rape case, where three men were accused of sexually assaulting a waitress on Block Island. That was the case where Judge Williams found that the law prohibiting oral sex was unconstitutional. So that's my claim to fame.¹ It was unprecedented to be representing a citizen accused in a case and have such public media coverage against the lawyers. Mary Ann Sorrentino had the 'scum bag countdown,' and my name was mentioned on the radio because I was defending someone who was presumed innocent. It was a pretty amazing experience at the time, and I learned a lot. And the three defendants were acquitted, as they should have been.

Over the course of your career who was your most formidable opponent? That's a tie between Marc DeSisto and Patrick Youngs. And I think what made them formidable was that I could never

hate either one of them. They were really professional, really kind, really fair, very talented, and they never stopped being gentlemen.

What's been the single biggest change to the profession or the practice since you started in '77? That's a tie between two things.

The first one is the rampant sexism. When I first started in 1978 there were hardly any women in the field, and I think there was one defense lawyer, Allegra Munson, from the public defender's office, who was a fabulous advocate and really effective lawyer. But we just weren't taken seriously by the judges. Those were the days when people pinched you on the rear end. To this day, I remember trying a case in the 1990s [and the Judge took the bench] would say, 'Good morning, gentlemen.' I was a co-counsel in the case, and I just felt like saying, Jesus, they don't even know, or they don't even recognize I'm here. It really was difficult negotiating with other lawyers or being taken seriously, and that was hurtful. And that really has gone by the boards now. Women have made tremendous progress.

The other thing that has changed dramatically is the use of computers and the Internet. In terms of research, this is positive, but it has really changed the practice. It has changed the interaction between lawyers. Communication between attorneys has suffered because people are hiding behind emails. I don't think that's healthy, because it makes it much harder to establish relationships.

What advice would you give to new lawyers? Be yourself. Don't stay in a job so long that you become frustrated. Learn what it is you want to do. Never be afraid to ask for advice or for help. Call a more experienced member of the Bar. Don't be afraid to ask a stupid question. Go to court and watch other lawyers. Keep up on your reading. And do the best you can.

In addition to her zealous advocacy and legal victories, Attorney Gescheidt takes pride in her role as a trailblazer for professional attire. She helped champion the way for pant suits (and, cowboy boots) in court. In more ways than one, her service to the Bar certainly warrants appreciation.

¹ You can read the full decision at *State v. McGovern*, 1998 WL 252236 (R.I. 1998).



Lise Gescheidt

Lunch with Legends:

Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



Matthew R. Plain, Esq.



Elizabeth R. Merritt, Esq.

Taylor Duane Barton & Gilman, LLP, Providence

Louise Durfee grew up in Tiverton where she lives today. After graduating from Connecticut College with a major in government, she attended Yale Law School where she was one of only four women in a graduating class of approximately 125. Although she graduated in 1955, she did not begin practicing law in Rhode Island until 1966. When asked why, she explained that after interviewing with one of Rhode Island's well-known and largest law firms, she received a letter stating that the firm already had one woman and urged her to seek employment elsewhere. So she did. She worked at a New York firm for eleven years until she made her way back home, accepting a position as the first female attorney at Tillinghast. At the time, Ms. Durfee was one of only a handful of female faces in the Rhode Island legal community (Ada Sawyer being another). While she humbly rejects being categorized as a legend, over forty-five years later, she was and is a mover and shaker in the Rhode Island legal community. Excerpts from our conversation with Ms. Durfee follow.



Louise Durfee

What has been your biggest challenge, hurdle or obstacle during the course of your legal career? I wished in some ways that I had come to Rhode Island when I got out of law school, because I always felt as if I was catching up. I mean, people had eleven years on me.

How did being a woman in your early career impact your law practice? It was okay for me to be in the back room doing research, but exposure to clients was not something that they could quite adjust to. And that took a while. My mentor was a fellow by the name of Andy DiPrete who had been at Yale Law ahead of me. And, after watching this go on, [at Tillinghast] he introduced me to clients. I would say that he was probably the one person who really helped my career. No question.

To what do you attribute your success as a professional? Living longer always helps. Honestly. I have worked at it, and I've certainly enjoyed the practice of law more than I ever

enjoyed law school. So, all I can tell you is I probably worked to do whatever had to be done. It's not very exciting, but that's how I view it.

What has been one of the most challenging transactions you were involved with over the course of your career? When I was Director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, at one point, we closed down a steel plant that was emitting pollutants over in East Providence. It was done under Sundlun's cabinet, and we went in on a contempt action. Now, this was a big employer, a steel mill, the only one in Rhode Island, and the judge closed it down. Those kinds of things you don't forget. There was a headline in the *Providence Journal* which said, "Durfee 1, Jobs 0."

What is the best advice that you've ever received? I have worked with people over the years, but there is one standout, and that is a guy by the name of Ted Pliakas (now deceased). He was great to work with, but sometimes exasperating. He had extraordinarily high standards, and one of the things I watched about him was that he made his clients' problems his problems. And what that meant was almost total care of an issue. He worked beyond belief, but he was very kind to his clients. Just watching him work, you would emulate that a little, or try to. You could never do it as successfully as he did it, but he was just terrific to work with.

What has been one of your most inventive or creative legal arguments? I can't say. With most projects I've worked on it's just a tough slog, you know? Nothing really stands out. It's just perseverance, staying with it, patience, countering issues, and solving them. I'm not really a legend. I'm more of a foot soldier.

The letter advising her that the large firm already had one female remained on Louise Durfee's wall for years. Certainly, the communication served as an amusing inspiration to her, in the same way as her trailblazing legal career serves as an inspiration for others. Yet, her legendary status does not exist because she is a woman. Rather, she earned it by being a dedicated foot soldier, "slogging" it out for her clients, and getting the job done.

Editor's Note: The authors thank Dorothy M. Depointe for her valuable assistance in transcribing this and past recordings of interviews from which Lunch with Legends are drawn.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

An Interview With Jessie M. Reniere, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

> **What is your current title and position?**

I am an associate in the Corporate and Business Group at Hinckley Allen.

> **What do you actually do all day?**

This is hard to answer because my practice is varied, but the majority of the work I do is in mergers and acquisitions. I represent buyers and sellers of companies, conducting due diligence on the target company, drafting and reviewing disclosure schedules and other transaction documents, and tracking the status of deliverables to make sure we're on schedule for closing. I've also worked on public finance and venture capital transactions, and lately, I've been doing a lot of commercial contract review and negotiation. Everything I do is transactional – I don't work on any litigation matters.

> **How do you think COVID and remote work has impacted the start of your legal career?**

It's actually hard for me to say because I don't really know what it would have been like otherwise. I was only in the office for about six months before we started working from home. I'm really glad, though, that I was able to meet people in person from all of Hinckley Allen's different offices when I was a summer associate and then during those first six months as an associate. That made it easier to send an email or pick up the phone to ask for help when I couldn't stop by people's offices anymore. The senior associates in my group were also extremely supportive – I think they were all more aware than I was of the challenges I was facing.

> **Can you tell us one thing you have learned while being a new attorney?**

One thing I've learned as a new attorney is to get comfortable being uncomfortable. When I first started, I was anxious about my lack of experience and felt like I didn't know how to do anything. Then, as soon as I felt comfortable doing something, I'd be asked to do something more advanced and I was back to square one! I've had to learn to trust my ability to pick things up on the fly. It's actually one of the reasons I love being a lawyer – I like the challenge of learning something new every day.

> **We have done a few of these interviews now and several of the new attorneys we have talked to mention the value of having a good reputation, even early on in your legal career. Have you thought much about this issue?**

I really value having a reputation as someone who is easy to work with. I make it a point to establish that reputation not just with clients and my colleagues at the firm, but with the attorneys and advisors on the other side too. While there are definitely times that negotiations are tense and the situation calls for me to be assertive, my view is that we're all working toward the common goal of closing the deal. I've been able to get more done for my clients by working to establish myself as someone who is



JESSIE M. RENIERE, ESQ.

reasonable, flexible, and respectful. I'm always really glad when both sides share closing congratulations, say how great it's been to work with each other, and mean it.

> **Who is your biggest inspiration inside or outside of law?**

My biggest inspiration is my mom, May, who passed away just before I graduated from law school. She was, and still is, the smartest person I've ever known. When I told her the thesis of my law review comment, which had already been selected for publication, she picked apart my whole policy argument to the point where I was actually questioning it myself! She was also very independent. She grew up in Hilo, Hawaii, and then came to Rhode Island to go to Brown University. I don't think she had ever been to the mainland before, but she insisted that she wanted to go to a school on the East Coast. She was so far away from her family and there were significant cultural differences for her here, but she stayed in Rhode Island for another 30 years before moving back to Hawaii.

She was a great role model for me as a working mom – when I was a baby, my dad stayed home with me while my mom was establishing her career as a research and strategy consultant. Later, after they



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were divorced, she even started a small business with my dad while still working in consulting. My dad still owns and runs that business, Ray's Hockey, 24 years later.

My mom was also very passionate about her volunteer work at The UCAP School, which is a middle school for students from Providence, Cranston, and Central Falls who are at risk for dropping out of high school. She loved getting to know the students and helping them get back up to their grade level.

> **What do you do to de-stress?**

I take Japanese lessons once a week with a tutor, which I really enjoy. My grandmother speaks limited English and so I've always wanted to learn Japanese to better communicate with her. I also enjoy baking, yoga, and this past summer I started learning to play golf.

> **How do you feel about the Great British Baking Show?**

I absolutely love it! I wish I could bake like the contestants. I love their creativity and I am so impressed with their technical skills, especially when they don't have a recipe. I was so happy when Giuseppe won the last season.

> **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

Greenwich Bay Oyster Bar in East Greenwich is one of my favorites. It's really small and they have great food. I especially love their raw bar.

> **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

My dog, Cammy. She is from Mississippi and I adopted her through Friends of Homeless Animals Rhode Island when I first started at Hinckley Allen. I've always thought she sort of looks like Snoopy. She likes to make the occasional appearance on video calls and she provides excellent moral support when things are stressful!

> **According to your firm's website, you worked in Government Relations at IGT where you managed compliance matters including global anti-corruption, lobbying, campaign finance, and ethics. Can you tell us a little bit about your part in the fight against global anti-corruption?**

Global anti-corruption law is a huge interest of mine. At IGT, I worked with in-house counsel to ensure that the company's global government relations activities were in compliance with the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and similar statutes, as well as company policy. During law school, I took a class on anti-corruption law and wrote my law review comment about it. I also had the chance to work on global anti-corruption matters as a Corporate Counsel Extern at Textron.

> **How have you chosen to decorate your office?**

My uncle, David Reniere, is an artist so I have one of his paintings framed in my office. I also have a whiteboard, which I use to make to-do lists and organize my thoughts. I like using brightly colored whiteboard markers to color code things—there is something very satisfying about color-coding!

An Interview with Samantha Armstrong, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

> **What is your current title and position?**

In October 2020, I started my position as a staff attorney at Catholic Social Services of Fall River. My department is called ILEAP, which stands for Immigration Law Education & Advocacy Project. I work almost exclusively with asylum seekers, representing them before the immigration court and the asylum office.

> **What do you actually do all day?**

I talk to clients, prepare declarations, prepare affidavits, conduct research on country conditions, compile affidavits from family members, and gather evidence from sources like medical records or police reports. Most of my clients are from Central America. While I only know a limited amount of Spanish, we have great paralegals and an Americorps Legal Advocate who speak Spanish and help us with translation.

> **Can you tell us what you have learned while being a new attorney?**

Prior to starting in my position, I clerked for one year in the Law Clerk Department in Rhode Island Superior Court. Then I clerked for one year for Justice Robinson in Rhode Island Supreme Court. I had the opportunity to work with great judges and court staff, and I got to see countless numbers of attorneys in action. I learned the value of being kind to people, the value of being thorough, and the value of producing quality work when you are representing your clients. I learned that judges are people too. They are human and are concerned about others, about the litigants, and about how the results of cases will affect others. I never felt like anyone was trying to push their agenda, rather the judges I worked with were really focused on the impact of their decisions on others and the law.

> **Who is your biggest inspiration inside or outside of law?**

Within the law, I have been inspired by Justice Robinson, previous supervisors, and co-clerks. Justice Robinson inspires me to never stop learning and working hard. My mentors in practice have taught me how to interact with clients, how to draft documents, and even the importance of closely reviewing emails before hitting send. Outside of the law, Jesus is a role model for me in how I live and work. I work to treat people fairly and deny my own selfish tendencies. Jesus is a model of humility and grace and treating others fairly.

> **What do you do to de-stress?**

I like to spend time outside with the people I care about most—my husband and my kids. I like to take my dog for a walk or go for a hike. I also like to take my kids to the playground.

> **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

I love Mexican food, so Tallulah's Taqueria and the Burrito Bowl.

> **You are not originally from New England, how did you end up here?**

I met my husband in college in Auburn, AL. After college, I moved to



SAMANTHA ARMSTRONG, ESQ.

Nashville and he moved to New England to take a job in Groton, CT. I looked at law schools up here and then landed on Roger Williams and have never left. What I like most about this area is that you are always only a short drive, or even walking distance, from the coast or some body of water.

> **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

I could not live without Facetime or some video-calling app. All of our family members are spread across the country, and I need regular contact with my and my husband's family.

> **What is it like being a new attorney who is the working mom of 2 young children?**

It is busy and stressful at times, but coming home from work to my kids provides the perfect balance for me. I am really thankful for the flexibility in the job I have. Since graduating, my employers have embraced me and my kids and have been understanding with childcare issues.

> **What advice do you have for new working moms?**

When I first went back to work after my son was born, I felt so bad that he was spending nine hours a day at daycare. I started to think that if I was away from him that much, he would be more attached to



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his teachers at daycare than me. But this was never true; the bond we have is much stronger than that. So I would say, don't feel any guilt about working and daycare. Just focus on making the time you have with your kids special. Don't be too stressed about household chores. If the laundry needs to be done and your kid wants to play, play!

➤ **What do you find the most meaningful in your work?**

Part of the reason I went to law school was my previous work with a refugee resettlement agency. Working there sparked my interest in working with immigrants because I loved hearing their life stories and helping them get their lives established here in the US. I try to provide some hope for the future for clients who have had such traumatic pasts. Also, I have found that many low-income clients end up involved in the legal system, but have no real context of what is going on. I find it meaningful to be able to explain the law to them and to help them understand what is going on when they feel like they are being shuffled around through the legal system without any choice in the matter.

➤ **What do members of the bar who do not practice asylum law need to know about asylum law?**

The media can sometimes make it seem that the majority of asylum seekers are falsely claiming asylum to stay in the US as long as possible. That is not true. There is a backlog, sometimes up to seven years. Many of those impacted by the delays want nothing more than to have their claims heard so they can move on with their lives. The administration of the process is imperfect and unnecessary delays are endemic. Before this work, I didn't know the extent of these delays. I think it is important for people to understand the extent of the backlog. More generally, I think it is important for all attorneys to remember that everyone has a unique story to tell and to not place clients into stereotypes before getting to know them.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

An Interview with Emily Heisler, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

➤ **What is your current title and position?**

I am an associate attorney at Mancini Law LLC. My practice engages exclusively in Workers' Compensation Law, representing employers. Before starting my current position, I clerked for the Rhode Island Workers' Compensation Court.

➤ **What do you actually do all day?**

I am always busy. For a small office, we have a lot of clients. I spend my workdays reviewing medical records, deposing doctors and employees, conducting legal research, and attending hearings. This morning, I had 3 pre-trial conferences, although all were via telephone because of COVID-19. However, we look forward to returning to the courtroom in person again, hopefully soon.

➤ **Can you tell us what you have learned while being a new attorney in Rhode Island?**

I have had a wonderful experience. As a law student, I interned at the Rhode Island Attorney General's office three times and knew almost nothing about the Workers' Compensation Court. When I began my clerkship with that Court, I was blown away by the differences in litigation practice among the different courts in Rhode Island. I have the pleasure of working in an area which has a small bar and is so collegial. Someone once described the Workers' Compensation bar to me as "Rhode Island's hidden legal gem," and it really is.

➤ **Who is your biggest inspiration inside or outside of law?**

My inspiration comes from both of my parents. My dad exemplifies kindness, decency, and intelligence. My mom is an example of courage, leadership, and independence. Together they inspire my strong work ethic and have given me the support to pursue a career I am passionate about.

➤ **What do you do to de-stress?**

I spend time with my boyfriend, who is also a new attorney. We have a dog, Lumi, who we rescued. Her name means snow in Finnish. We enjoy hiking and exploring all the beautiful scenery in Rhode Island – especially the water views. I also just got a Peloton and am enjoying the convenience of it after a busy workday.

➤ **What is the next goal you hope to accomplish in your career?**

I would like to develop my reputation as both a fair and effective lawyer. In the future, I would like to work toward becoming a partner at my current firm or starting a firm of my own. I would also like to teach a Workers' Compensation law course at RWUSOL as an Adjunct Professor someday.

➤ **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

Pomodoro Italian Restaurant and Pizzeria in Bristol is my favorite place to get dinner. They have the best vodka sauce.



EMILY HEISLER, ESQ.

➤ **You are not originally from Bristol – how did you end up here?**

I am from Gwynedd, PA. When I was applying to law schools, my older sister was attending JWU's Physician Assistant Studies program. During a visit to see her, I toured RWU Law and was very impressed. I toured the campus and met former Dean Michael Yelnosky. When I returned to my car, he had left a handwritten note on the windshield which read, "[w]e don't have cheesesteaks in Rhode Island, but the Providence food scene is pretty good." That personal touch meant a lot to me and indicated that RWU would care about me as a student. Rhode Island is now home to me.

➤ **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

My planner! President Eisenhower said, "plans are useless but planning is everything." I believe this quote rings particularly true for attorneys.

➤ **Name the most influential lawyer in your career so far.**

Of course, my boss, Nick Mancini, is an inspiration for me. I am constantly amazed by his keen instincts in the courtroom and during depositions. However, the person who has impacted me the most thus far has been Assistant Attorney General Daniel Guglielmo. I was



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an intern for him when he led the Domestic Violence Unit. Dan taught me that you can be kind and empathetic and still be an effective, successful lawyer. Under his guidance, I developed skills that I will carry with me throughout my entire career.

➤ **What do you find the most meaningful in your work?**

For me, the most meaningful part is appearing in the courtroom. I find it rewarding when I can craft and deliver a legal argument, resulting in a fair result for the client. The unique thing about the Rhode Island Workers' Compensation system is that it has its own trial and appellate level courts, which allows me to appear in court quite frequently.

➤ **How have you chosen to decorate your office?**

I have only been in my office for a few months, but I have added a few green plants and pictures of my family, friends, and dog. The best part of my office is a fireplace that the former (now retired) attorney left behind. Not only does it warm my office, but my boss's French Bulldog named Blueberry, likes to come in and nap in front of it.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

An Interview with Kaylin Pelletier-Koenig, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a new spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

> **What is your current title and position?**

I am a Staff Attorney at Operation Stand Down Rhode Island (OSDRI) which is a veteran-founded, veteran-run 503(c) non-profit organization that provides “wrap-around services” for veterans, military families, and currently enlisted service people. “Wrap-around services” is a broad term that could include food from our food pantry, clothing from our clothing shed, employment services, housing/rental assistance, and legal assistance.

> **What do you actually do all day?**

I am one of four attorneys who work on a variety of matters such as screening new clients, pro bono work, legal work for reduced fees, criminal record expungement, family law, eviction work, social security hearings, and traffic tribunal cases. In the course of a day, I might be in client meetings, reviewing medical records, in administrative hearings, or in court proceedings. We get cases as referrals from the Providence VA Medical Center, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Veterans Treatment Court, and a network of community providers.

> **Who is your biggest role model in or out of the law?**

Definitely my father. My dad is the hardest working person. He is my best friend, my confidant, and my go-to for everything from job advice, to life advice, to marriage advice. He is one of the only people I have been able to count on. He is a single dad, business owner, and mechanic. My heart of gold comes from him.

> **What do you do to de-stress?**

I play with my 6-year-old, 50 pound black Labrador Retriever named Chevy. Although COVID has changed some things, I like to go to the shooting range and the beach. I also have dinner at my Gram’s every Monday night and have volunteered once a week for the last 9 years at the St. Charles Church Soup Kitchen in Providence. Time with my family and volunteering helps me to stay humble and appreciate all I have in my life.

> **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

I go through phases but I was fairly obsessed with Black Oak Kitchen and Drinks in Coventry. When my husband was deployed, I would take myself out to date night there!

> **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

My husband. My husband was deployed to Kuwait, Iraq, and Syria from January to Thanksgiving of 2020. It was hard for me but even harder for him. The 11 months or so he was gone is one of the hardest things we have ever gone through as a couple but it was his dream. He had so much instability growing up that it was my pleasure to support his dream to enlist as a paratrooper. I am so thankful to have him home and safe.

> **What do you find most rewarding about your job?**

I wanted to enlist in college but I have a medical condition which makes me unable to serve. This job is a way to give back. In law school, I was looking for ways to serve this community and started working at Rhode Island Legal Services where I worked with a few veterans. I can’t put on the uniform and serve in the traditional sense, but I can use my law degree to



KAYLIN PELLETIER-KOENIG, ESQ.

help others who can and have. The most rewarding part is when a veteran comes to me at his or her worst, dealing with homelessness or unemployment or legal issues, and you can help him or her to the point where he or she is happy and healthy and providing for him or herself. It makes me feel like Wonder Woman!

> **What do you think attorneys need to know when working with a veteran?**

You cannot be a lawyer or do your job in this country without veterans and their service. When veterans get home, they get cut loose into society with very little support. By the time they get to us as lawyers, they don’t just have legal issues, they have economic, social, housing, and family issues. Unfortunately, more often than not, we can’t just fix one legal issue we need to take a holistic approach, which is OSDRI’s model. Sometimes veterans can get a bad reputation, but they are just regular people. We need to have compassion and gratitude for them.

> **Finally, what do you think this country needs to do to better support its veterans?**

I have always been told that most veterans who commit suicide are actually already enrolled in the VA Healthcare System. The problem is that veterans are sometimes too proud to take the help available to them. We need to not only apprise them of the available services and resources, but we also need to ENCOURAGE them to use these services and destigmatize asking for help. They served our country; now it is our turn to serve them. That’s actually one of OSDRI’s mottos. We can only serve them if we encourage them and convince them they aren’t “weak” for needing help.



DYSZLEWSKI



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FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

An Interview with Monsurat Ottun, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

➤ **What is your current title and position?**

I am an Assistant City Solicitor for the City of Providence.

➤ **What do you actually do all day?**

My role is multi-faceted. Most recently, I have become primarily responsible for our cybersecurity initiatives, working on our information security, data privacy and risk management infrastructure, protocol and policies. I used to prosecute cases in the Providence District Court and still manage aspects of Municipal Court prosecution. I am also a civil litigator in Superior Court and work on the City's contracts as a part of our contracts team. Additionally, I get to work on and support some of the Mayor's initiatives such as his Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Executive Order as well as play a role in the African American Ambassadors Group, and more specifically the Police Advisory sub-group. No two days are alike for me. I attend many meetings and also do a lot of advising, as well as document review and editing. I advise the Board of Park Commissioners, the Providence Human Relations Commission, and the Committee on Urban Redevelopment, Renewal and Planning as well as lead our Vendor Management and newly formed Information Security Advisory Group. Ironically, I wanted to be a transactional attorney! I was initially hired to do work with the City's contracts but soon found myself taking on a whole lot more. Having been able to work on different aspects of legal work, I have come to appreciate and enjoy the different facets of everything I get to do.

➤ **Who is your biggest inspiration inside or outside of law?**

There have been several attorneys that have been supportive of my journey through law school and beyond. Specifically, Judge Thompson, Judge Savage, Attorney Tara Allen, Attorney Deborah Johnson, and Attorney Kathy Thompson. They have all supported me on my journey to becoming a lawyer and inspire me to work through the obstacles to achieve success. An inspiration is Judge Melissa Dubose, an African-American female judge who was the first judge I have appeared in front of in Providence District Court. She was also new to the bench but soon became a District Court favorite. She shows me that judges can be kind, patient, and relatable. That can be hard to find in our profession.

➤ **What do you do to de-stress?**

I have been thinking about self-care a lot lately. To de-stress I try to be active when I have the time. I go to the gym, hike, or go for a walk on the beach – really helps me clear my mind. I have also gone to paint nights (now I get to do it virtually ever since COVID), and I take a dance class and read interesting books.

➤ **What is the next goal you hope to accomplish in your career?**

I recently graduated last May with my Master's Degree in cybersecurity. I would love to be able to merge my work in cybersecurity with my work in



MONSURAT OTTUN, ESQ.

business and law in a strategic and meaningful way. To an extent, I get to do that now but with everything going on in the world, I would like to continue to explore how I can build an expertise that will significantly help in dealing with some of our social issues going forward. There is a lot happening with technology and advancements in the law. It's kind of exciting.

I also do some work with small businesses and nonprofits on strategic planning, growth, and development. I'd like to continue to be a support for local economic and community development in some way, shape, or form.

➤ **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

I don't have a favorite restaurant of all time but I do enjoy trying new places. I just tried the Rhody Hen, which is a quaint breakfast spot in my hometown, Pawtucket. I also recently tried a new spot on Armistice Blvd, which was pretty good. Any spot with good breakfast food, really good pasta or Nigerian food is a plus for me.

➤ **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

I cannot live without my planner. It keeps me organized and on top of my day. My planner is a comprehensive one that helps me to stay on top of my short- and long-term goals, my daily habits, and my day-to-day schedule. I'd be lost without it.

➤ **Name the most influential lawyer(s) in your career so far.**

There are three attorneys, who stick out to me right now, who have helped and mentored me in different ways, especially since I have only been practicing for about three years.

At the City of Providence, Noah Kilroy



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FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Continued

has been a great coach and friend. He has taught me a lot about litigation and really ushered me into the prosecutor role. Noah consistently encouraged me to overcome fears of failing or of messing up and instead to just fall or fail forward – take notes, learn the lessons, and do it better next time. Steve Nelson has been a great support and mentor, particularly when it comes to trial practice. I have never met anyone more patient or more thorough. He has often made me feel like I know more and can do more than I think I can.

Finally, Bridgette Louro, who was my supervisor at Rhode Island Legal Services, taught me to be confident in my own abilities as an attorney. She was my first supervisor in litigation practice and believed in my abilities as a litigator who was just starting out. Her support and coaching made me really feel like I could do it.

There are many others, too many to name. I'm grateful for the overall support and encouragement I've received as an attorney.

> **What do you find the most meaningful in your work?**

The most rewarding part of my job is that my work has a direct impact on my community at large. The office environment is very supportive and I have found that the work challenges me and pushes me outside my comfort zone. I have learned so much about law and about how government works in a few short years.

> **How have you chosen to decorate your office?**

My office has very good feng shui I would say. It has a calm feel to it, achieved through lamps and other personal inspirations. Most that walk into my office tend to like the feel or vibe it gives off. My favorite photos on my walls are one of Misty Copeland, an African American professional ballet dancer, and one of a sunset I took at Clearwater Beach in Florida. The combination of calm and inspirational are likely the themes of my office.

> **You were recently named the Muslim-American Community Liaison for the City of Providence. What has your experiences been like as a Muslim-American attorney?**

Being the Muslim-American Liaison has been rewarding for me. We're currently working on a City webpage dedicated to the education on, and resources for, our community. I would say that as a Black female Muslim lawyer, when I walk into a courtroom, people often make assumptions about me – oftentimes it is that I am not even an attorney, never mind credible or potentially good at what I do. Honestly, I can never tell if it's simply because I look young, or if it's something else. I recognize that I have a bigger burden to prove myself because of stigmas placed on me, however, I continue to just focus on what's in front of me and build on my skills as an attorney. I am grateful for the many surrounding judges, attorneys, and City employees that I work with that are supportive and forward-thinking/acting. I don't see my faith as a burden in my profession but rather as a blessing, allowing me to educate and create opportunities to build awareness around the community of people that share my beliefs. I have been able to positively affect law and policy in Providence and I continue to answer and address issues around race and religion with those that are interested in having those sometimes uncomfortable conversations.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

An Interview with Michaela Bland, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a new spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

➤ **What is your current title and position?**

I am a Staff Attorney at the Rhode Island Center for Justice. I am also a Skadden Fellow, which is a project-based two-year fellowship in public interest law funded by the Skadden Fellowship Foundation. Through my Skadden Fellowship, I am working on a two-year public interest law project at the Rhode Island Center for Justice on education pipeline issues. I provide direct representation, community education, and legislative advocacy on issues relating to the school-to-prison pipeline. At the end of my fellowship, I hope to obtain a position as a federal court clerk.

➤ **What do you actually do all day?**

Every day I work on both big picture and small picture things related to defending students' right to an education free of discrimination. For example, most days I interact with or meet with members of community organizations like Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE), the Providence Student Union (PSU), Youth in Action (YIA), the Rhode Island Urban Debate League (RIUDL) and Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM). I meet with these organizations to focus on on-going policy work. I also may work on an actual case where I am directly representing an aggrieved student or may attend meetings as a liaison. For example, I was a liaison for the state's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee. Additionally, I cover emergency needs at the Center. Recently, I represented someone at trial in housing court.

➤ **What do you like the most about your position?**

I love working with the community organizations. The work is all about giving life to the voice and vision of students. It is beautiful to listen to the ideas of the youth but then be able to use strategies I learned in law school to amplify their voices. Conversely, the biggest challenge is the "adults know best" attitude that many have. There are some who feel that students shouldn't have power and it is hard work trying to shift the power dynamic.

➤ **What is your best advice to those in power based on your work in this fellowship?**

Listen more to the younger voices around you. They are our future.

➤ **What is your best advice to other public interest attorneys?**

Persist! You will be challenged, ignored, and shut down. Dance in the discomfort. You will find allies and be able to build the community. Change happens slowly but that is okay. Persist anyway.

➤ **Who is your biggest role model in or out of the law?**

I am empowered every day by the fact that I am living my ancestors' wildest dreams.



MICHAELA BLAND, ESQ.

➤ **What do you do to de-stress?**

I never want to get to the point where the facts of a case don't affect me. I don't ever want to lose the connection with the clients and with justice. I view everything through a humanitarian lens and want to continue that. I volunteer as a member of the board of directors of New Urban Arts (an organization that positively impacts high school students, predominately those of color, through art) and I also take a weekly dance class. It is my sacred space I use to recharge and fill up my cup. I also have a great group of supportive friends who help put my pieces back together when I am stressed out.

➤ **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

Plant City in Providence.

➤ **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

Generally, music. Specifically, Spotify. I am always on Spotify!

➤ **How have you chosen to decorate your office?**

My office is very nature-themed. I have photos from different seasons with rustic overtones. I like to retain my connection to the outside world even while at work. I also have different posters in my office that reflect the great pioneers of social justice. It is very important to me that my office space remain authentic to who I am as a person and the social causes I believe in.



DYSZLEWSKI



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Past, Present and Future: Women in the Law and the Superior Court



Hon. Alice B. Gibney
Presiding Justice of the
Rhode Island Superior Court

After consideration, we are of the opinion that the word 'person' should be construed to include a woman as well as a man."

Editor's Note: The appointment of Alice B. Gibney as Presiding Justice of the Rhode Island Superior Court marks another significant milestone for women in the State's legal profession. During her acceptance speech, Justice Gibney addressed a number of Rhode Island's legal luminaries, women and men, who have served as her inspiration, mentors and colleagues. An excerpt from her remarks follows.

When I began to practice, in the Turks Head Building, 13th floor, down the hall from Frank Darigan, I shared a ladies' room, with Ada Sawyer, whose office was next door. She was charming, reserved, understated, and good company. (When the Wilcox Building burned down, we watched the fire from her office).

Prior to 1917, Ada worked as the secretary/stenographer for Attorney Percy Gardner. In 1917, she filed, with the Board of Bar Examiners, her intention of studying the law as clerk to Mr. Gardner. This was an appropriate avenue to the bar at the time.

In 1920, having completed her studies, she applied to take the bar exam. The requirements at that time provided that any appropriately qualified "person" could take the exam. But there was skepticism within the Board of Bar Examiners about the meaning of the word person. The skepticism was such that the Board sought guidance from the Supreme Court. Justice Sweetland, later Chief Justice, ruled that, and I quote, "After consideration, we are of the opinion that the word 'person' should be construed to include a woman as well as a man."

In the past weeks, I have thought about Ada Sawyer and my connection to her and how delighted she would be, how thrilled she would be, to see so many persons here today. Persons at the bar, persons on the bench, persons in the Legislature. We're everywhere.

Parenthetically, I would add that, subsequent to the Supreme Court decision, Ada took the Bar exam, passed it, joined Mr. Gardner's practice, became a named partner, and enjoyed a thriving probate and tax practice for the next sixty-three years. She retired in 1985 at the age of ninety-one. We celebrate Ada today; a very special person.

In 1970, I met Judge Florence Murray, for whom I subsequently clerked. She was outgoing, aggressive and as in the mix as Ms. Sawyer was reserved and reticent. They were equally bright. Judge Murray deconstructed every verbal nuance, facial tic and current event in a color commentary that took one's breath away. She was a fascinating woman.

When I was appointed to this Court, the very first note I received was from Judge Corinne Grande. It was gracious and welcoming and it means as much to me now as it did then. We served as colleagues until her retirement and she remains an example of how one can be

effective without every raising one's voice. I am honored that she joins us here today.

There have been men in my professional life who have afforded me great opportunities and served as models of professionalism: Charlie and Paul Anderson, Frank and Paul Reynolds, Bernie Boyer, Tony DeMarco. I loved every day I practiced law.

Governor Garrahy appointed me on two occasions, first to the Compensation Commission and then to the Superior Court. I am eternally grateful for his confidence in me, and I value him as a dear, dear friend.

Before we had mentoring, I had Dominic. I was Cresto'd. We had never met when I joined the Court. But he was there as a guide, sounding board and shoulder to lean on from day one until today. He is an invaluable friend.

The three Presiding Justices for whom I have worked had disparate styles and personalities, but each was dedicated to this court and the public it served: Anthony Giannini, a source of encouragement very early in my career, formal, gracious, a very dry wit; Jack Orton, informal, outgoing, and a vigorous trial judge; and Joe Rodgers, a colleague and friend for twenty-five years. He is a role model for quiet, solid, even-handed management. He required no fanfare. His was a total devotion to this Court and its staff. Our efficient service to the public was his constant goal and all his energies were devoted to that end. He is the gold standard.

I have no illusions about this job. It is difficult and challenging. We are in a very different time. A time that bears scant resemblance to years past. We operate under financial and personnel constraints which tax our ability to be as efficient and accommodating as we have been in the past. But we will make do. We will adapt. We will adjust. It will require tapping into our reserves of patience and cooperation and creativity.

I am confident that we will rise to this occasion and, as always, we will get the work done because this is truly a Superior Court, in every sense of the word. Please know, the door will always be open, to colleagues, staff, members of the bar, law enforcement, and community outreach organizations. The door will always be open. I welcome your input, your suggestions, and your critiques. ♦

The Long and Winding Road: Pursuing Gender Equality in Rhode Island

This article was originally published in the Roger Williams University Law Review Volume 25, Issue 3, Summer 2020. Below is an excerpt from the original article. To read the full article and the author's sources, please [click here](#).



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ABSTRACT

For decades, national organizations and local bar leaders have taken numerous steps to raise awareness of the need to increase gender equality within the legal profession. In the 1980s, national organizations encouraged judicial involvement in the formation of task forces to investigate gender bias in the courts, issue recommendations to address the problems, and form committees to monitor the elimination of gender bias. Rhode Island was an early leader in response to this call to action: it became the third state to form such a committee—the Rhode Island Supreme Court Committee on Women in the Courts—which issued a report in 1987.

While there have undeniably been some advances in Rhode Island to promote gender equality since the 1987 report, much work remains to be done. There must be a conscious, long-term commitment to eliminate gender bias, while identifying ongoing and emerging problems. We all have a responsibility to fight for equality in the legal profession.

INTRODUCTION

In 1984, acknowledging a problem of gender bias in the courts, Joseph A. Bevilacqua, then-Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, appointed the Committee on Women in the Courts (the Committee). Chief Justice Bevilacqua charged the Committee with three tasks: “1. Determine the extent of the problem; 2. Document specific instances of discrimination; [and] 3. Develop programs to eliminate gender bias.”¹

After approximately two-and-a-half years of data collection and interpretation, the Committee issued a report in 1987. Based on the investigation, the Committee concluded that “discrimination based on gender [wa]s a serious problem in the Rhode Island courts.”² However, Rhode Island male attorneys were largely unaware of or refused to acknowledge gender-bias issues. Although the Committee verified gender-bias complaints with objective data—including trained courtroom observers, who witnessed an average of 1.64 gender-bias incidents per hour during the study—approximately 66% of male attorneys reported having never seen gender discrimination in the Rhode Island state courts.³ The Committee dismissed any notion that the discriminatory environment was a limited “woman issue”; this was a systemic issue with the judiciary’s administration of justice that adversely impacted the rights of Rhode Islanders.⁴ Given the extent of the problem, the Committee also recognized that efforts to eliminate gender bias required long-term commitment.

Although the chief justices of the Rhode Island Supreme Court embraced a permanent committee to root out gender bias, many of the problems identified in the Committee’s report from 1987 still exist today. Throughout the legal profession, there is persistent often subtle and unconscious—stemming from society’s deep-seated patriarchal foundation.⁵ This deeply

entrenched and continuing discrimination against women impacting the legal profession has serious consequences. Although women and men have been graduating from law school and entering law firms in roughly equal numbers for decades, women continue to face a multitude of obstacles in the pursuit of a successful career. These obstacles force women out of the legal profession before ever having a chance to pursue a successful career.⁶

The barriers women face from gender bias start early in a legal career.⁷ A recent study noted that “women have comprised between 45% and 50% of entering law firm associates but nonetheless in 2018 account for just 20% of law firm equity partners.”⁸ By mid-career, additional barriers include lack of mentorship, lack of role models, and lack of sponsors to build their careers.⁹ Advancement is further hindered with biases against motherhood—whether a woman has children or not—and work-life balance.¹⁰ For women who obtain equity partnership, the wage gap amplifies: women equity partners earn 44% less than male colleagues.¹¹ These compounding barriers to a female lawyer’s career advancement have resulted in a high number of women lawyers pushed out of the profession.¹²

Although there has been some improvement since the initial report by the Committee and Rhode Island’s achievements should be acknowledged, the journey is far from over. The Committee understood the identification and eradication of gender bias as a process, not a one-time event. Yet, around the turn of the century, the movement to eradicate gender bias started to lose steam.

Rhode Island must reinvigorate the movement initiated over thirty-five years ago and meaningfully address current issues with a new, deeper inquiry. Many of the original questions examined by the Committee deserve continued monitoring. Rich research into how implicit bias affects the legal profession and models of successful initiatives in other states offer guidance for addressing these issues in the legal profession in Rhode Island.

This Article examines some of the hurdles stalling the advancement of women in the Rhode Island legal profession and calls on the judiciary and legal community as a whole to mobilize in the efforts to eliminate gender bias in the legal profession. Section I reviews the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the original Committee in the 1987 report. Section II examines the efforts to carry out the recommendations to achieve gender equality undertaken by the implementation advisory committee, and the evolution of that process over the ensuing years. Section III calls for reinvigoration: mobilization of the legal community to renew and carry forward Rhode Island’s efforts to eliminate gender bias in the legal system.

Please [click here](#) to continue reading the full article.

History of the First Women Project

Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq.

This article was originally published in the Roger Williams University Law Review Volume 25, Rev. 307, Summer 2020. Below is an excerpt from the original article. To read the full article and the author's sources, please [click here](#).

It would be fair to say that the First Women project had its origins in several places. First, it could rightly be said that this project's origin was the very admission of Ada L. Sawyer to the Rhode Island Bar Association. On November 10, 1920, Sawyer's certificate to the bar made her the first female member admitted in Rhode Island.¹ It could also be said that the 1975 article *Women Lawyers in Rhode Island* by Sophie Douglass Pfeiffer might have been the original impetus for the First Women project, as this article memorialized the author's attempt to "cross-check the membership of the women lawyers' association against the bar association rolls."² Still further, about twenty years ago then-dean of Roger Williams University School of Law (RWU Law) Harvey Rishikof (Dean from 1999–2001)³ convened a meeting of some of the earliest female members of the Rhode Island Bar Association for a celebration event.⁴ The eventual goal of Dean Rishikof's event was to compile a list of these early female attorneys, but the project was never finished to completion.

But while the preceding events provide a backdrop, the 2017 Women in Robes event was the most direct origin for the First Women project in its current form. Women in Robes is an annual dinner sponsored by the RWU Law Women's Law Society, a student group. The event, which includes a speaking program, is intended to be "a wonderful opportunity for law students to engage with members of the judiciary and legal community in Rhode Island."⁵ One of the speakers at the 2017 Women in Robes event was the Honorable Netti C. Vogel. Her speech referenced the slow pace at which women became members of the Rhode Island bar. As RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky described it, "Judge Vogel spoke to our students about how slowly women became integrated into the Rhode Island bar . . . the first woman was admitted in 1920, but it was not until 50 years later that the total number of women admitted to practice in Rhode Island reached 30."⁶ In her speech, Judge Vogel also mentioned the earlier attempt to identify these early female members of the bar by RWU Law under the leadership of Dean Rishikof.

Following the event, Dean Yelnosky sent an email to Judge Vogel pledging the support of the law school to "finish[] the job Harvey [Rishikof] started."⁷ The email stated,

I would love to do what I can to resurrect the "First 25" project. One of the provisions in our draft strategic diversity plan focuses on the need to pay attention to the ways in which the representations of lawyers and judges in the law school buildings are consistent (or not) with our commitment to diversity. This project would be a great step in the right direction.⁸

As evidenced by the name Dean Yelnosky used, the project was envisioned as an attempt to "rediscover" the names of the first twenty-five female lawyers in Rhode Island. Also included in that email were a handful of attendees at the Women in Robes event, such as RWU Law student Lauren Higgins; President of the Women's Law Society, RWU Law Professor Emily Sack; faculty advisor to the Women's Law Society, RWU Law Assistant Dean of Students Lorraine Lalli; and RWU Law librarian Nicole P. Dyszlewski.

I. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Among the first things that needed to be established were the names of the first twenty-five female members of the bar.⁹ The task was complicated by some realities of record keeping and preservation. First, the Rhode Island Judiciary does not track or keep gender information on bar admittees. In fact, "the Rhode Island Supreme Court does not and has never tracked the gender of individuals admitted to the Rhode Island Bar."¹⁰ This posed a considerable challenge given that gender is arguably a social construct and inarguably difficult to ascertain with complete accuracy from historical records.¹¹

For the purposes of this project, those involved took a narrow view of gender. For the sake of this research we assigned the gender of female to those who had historically held themselves out to be female. Many times, we had to guess the gender of an attorney by using names and context.¹² Also making matters more challenging, the most complete historical records the Rhode Island Supreme Court does keep on members were "recorded by hand in ledger books that today are somewhat fragile."¹³ The Rhode Island Supreme Court was graciously willing to allow inspection of the ledgers, and stated, "[i]n response, and after considerable discussion among the staff, we feel the only option is to invite you to the Supreme Court clerk's office during business hours to view the entries from that period, and either record the names yourself or take a photo of the pages."¹⁴ However, this method of determining members' gender is not only time-consuming but problematic because of the vagaries of handwriting and the lack of inherent gender of names.¹⁵

Upon reflection, it was agreed that examining the ledger books was not the most efficient way of determining the names of early female attorneys, and this would be seen as a last resort. The next chapter of the research journey was written by good luck and the strong librarianship skills of RWU Associate Law Librarian Lucinda Harrison-Cox. Upon learning of the project to rediscover the names of the earliest female attorneys in Rhode Island, Harrison-Cox produced two documents from her office.

Please [click here](#) to continue reading the full article.

Boldly Marching Through Closed Doors: The Experiences of the Earliest Female Attorneys in Their Own Words

Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq.

This article was originally published in the Roger Williams University Law Review Volume 25, Rev. 340, Summer 2020. Below is an excerpt from the original article. To read the full article and the author's sources, please [click here](#).

INTRODUCTION: FROM NAMES TO PEOPLE

In 2019, Roger Williams University School of Law (RWU Law) celebrated the earliest women lawyers in Rhode Island at an event called “First Women.” This event was a culmination of a multi-year research project where researchers at RWU Law and members of the Rhode Island legal community worked together to rediscover and formally identify the so-called “First Women” lawyers of the Rhode Island bar.¹ While the stated goal of the project was to compile a list of the earliest women of the Rhode Island bar and to commemorate these women at an event at the law school, a perhaps unintended consequence of the work was that the interest in these women grew beyond the scope of a one night event. In fact, a committee of community members formed who envisioned and planned the next stages of the First Women project. The project, which started as compiling a list of names, grew to become a celebration of the women themselves and honoring their legacies today.

During the process of compiling the list, researchers found news articles, interviews, and surveys of these women attorneys. Part of celebrating the accomplishments of the earliest women attorneys in Rhode Island must be acknowledging their truth and bearing witness to what they experienced, overcame, and achieved. This article is an attempt to learn from and contextualize the list of the first women attorneys in Rhode Island. By examining the challenges faced and hurdles overcome by the early women attorneys in Rhode Island, one can compare those experiences to the current status of women in the legal profession in Rhode Island and further reflect on what has, or has not, changed.²

Part I of this article details the resources used by researchers. Part II presents themes within the source documents and accounts by the early women attorneys illustrating the complexities and obstacles overcome by these attorneys. These accounts are also contextualized within the national scholarship on gender bias experienced by female attorneys. Part III concludes with a brief discussion of counternarratives, intersectionalities, and opportunities for future study.

I. RESOURCES CONSULTED & METHODOLOGY

This article creates a context for the list of first women attorneys, which includes those admitted for practice in Rhode Island from 1920 to 1979. The list itself is an important document because it rediscovers those women, many of whose names had been lost to time. In attempting to compile this list, the researchers used

news articles, genealogical records, court documents, law journal articles, and bar journal articles.³ The researchers contacted librarians at the Rhode Island State Library, the Rhode Island State Law Library, and several other libraries and historical centers to locate source material. The names of the women on the list, while important, do not tell the full story of the First Women project. Rather, the names are a place to start. The stories of these women and their careers, struggles, victories, and lives are the most important part of the research.

This article is using the same research resources in an attempt to present what life was like for these attorneys. Additional articles, books, and reports were used to try to place the issues in a national context. The author reviewed the resources described in this section and identified trends in the women’s portrayals of their own experiences. Despite the author’s attempts to ensure the accuracy of its information, this article is doomed to be a flawed and incomplete record. This is true considering historical documents and interviews were utilized, memory is fallible and subjective, there is difficulty in reading historical accounts with a modern lens, and every woman has a different life experience and story to tell. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, this article is a necessary testament.

During the process of compiling the list, the research team reached out to the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* staff to inquire whether the journal would publish an early draft list to ask for community feedback. The editorial staff at the bar journal was so excited about the First Woman project that they not only published the draft list, but they also started to feature an interview series called Rhode Island Women: Past, Present, & Future. This now regular addition to the bar journal takes the form of an interview with a Rhode Island female attorney. The interviewers, Etie-Lee Schaub and Cassandra L. Feeney, prioritize interviews with First Women from the list. In addition to historical sources, these interviews were critical to this article.

Another source of what life was like for the earliest female attorneys in Rhode Island are surveys, particularly those done by the Rhode Island Supreme Court Permanent Advisory Committee on Women and Minorities.⁵ Generally, this article was written contemplating Cassandra L. Feeney’s *The Long and Winding Road: Pursuing Gender Equality in Rhode Island*, published simultaneously in this edition of the Roger Williams University Law Review, and leaves the results of those surveys to her work.

Please [click here](#) to continue reading the full article.

Rhode Island Women's Bar Association & the History of Women Lawyers in Our State

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This article originally appeared in Raising the Bar: America Celebrates 150 Years of Women Lawyers 1869 - 2019, National Conference of Women's Bar Associations, 69,70 (2019).

Every year in recent memory, the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association (RIWBA) and the student Women's Law Society of Roger Williams University School of Law (RWU Law) join together at an annual dinner named Women in Robes. At this yearly event, members of the Rhode Island bench and bar join law students for dinner, fellowship, and a short speaking program. At the Women in Robes event in 2017, a speech by Rhode Island Superior Court Justice Netti Vogel piqued much interest when she spoke of historical underrepresentation of women attorneys in Rhode Island. Out of this speech grew an intensive statewide collaborative effort to rediscover the history of women in law in our state. Beyond rediscovering the names of these women, we rediscovered, retold, and celebrated their lives, their careers, and their stories, even joining together to commemorate a plaque in honor of these "First Women" at the law school in April 2019. This article is a brief summary of the work done in Rhode Island by members of the RWU Law staff, faculty, and administration with the help of members of the state judiciary, the state Bar Association, members of the bench and bar, friends and family of these early women attorneys, and, of course, the RIWBA.

In order to celebrate the early women lawyers in our state, we had to first figure out who they were. One of the most surprising parts of our state's story is that no one in Rhode Island has been tracking members of the bar by gender in any wholistic way. As one might expect, that makes researching the history of women attorneys in our state quite a challenge.

Because there was no one entity that had tracked gender of lawyers in the state, researchers had to attempt to re-create a list. An incomplete list was found in an old filing cabinet and was used as a starting point of sorts. From there, the research team amassed the most complete collection to date by reviewing old news articles, historical law firm advertisements, old Supreme Court Rolls, historical Bar Association yearbooks, Bar Association archived data, and many conversations with community members. RWU Law Library researchers discovered that others, namely Cassandra L. Feeney and the RIWBA, had started similar projects. All involved shared their work to try to compile the most accurate list to date. The list was published in the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* with a statement that encouraged community members to send names of known or possible women who may have been overlooked or omitted. The legal community responded with several names and recollections, which were then further explored by the research team. The research was made especially challenging because of the practice of some women taking their spouses' names upon marriage. Led by the diligent efforts of researcher Nicole P. Dyszlewski and members of the RWU Law Library staff, we now have the clearest picture of the early women attorneys in our state that we have ever had. The first woman admitted to the Rhode Island Bar was Ada L. Sawyer. Rhode Island's foremost Ada L. Sawyer scholar is another female lawyer in our state, Denise Aiken. Aiken describes the hurdles Sawyer had to overcome in a 2010 article stating:

"[I]n 1920, when Ada took the Bar exam, many states including Rhode Island still allowed its applicants to read law. ...Percy W. Gardner was Ada's employer and tutor. However, when Ada went to take the exam, the Board of Bar Examiners balked. After all, the rules stated that any 'person' could read the law. Was a woman a person? They required a

letter from Supreme Court associate Justice (and later Chief Judge) William H. Sweetland ... since Ada L. Sawyer was found to be a person, she could sit for the exam."²

In another article, Aiken continues Sawyer's story, "Of the 22 people who took the bar in September 1920, she was the only one who passed who had not gone to either college or law school."³ From Sawyer's admission in 1920 to 1959, there were only 18 additional female lawyers to be admitted (five others were admitted in the 1920s, one in the 1930s, two in the 1940s, and nine in the 1950s). The number of women admitted rose modestly in the 1960s (two in 1960, two each in the years 1965, 1966, and 1967, one in 1968, and one in 1969). The numbers then rose dramatically in the 1970s, and by 1979, our state had seen a total of 176 female lawyers admitted to the bar.⁴ Next year, in 2020, will be the centennial celebration of Sawyer's admission to the Rhode Island Bar.

These 176 "First Women" were trailblazers. They include the first three female Supreme Court justices in Rhode Island, one of whom – the Hon. Maureen McKenna Goldberg – remains on the bench today.⁵ These "First Women" include at least 23 judges and justices who have sat on the Housing Court, Probate Court, Family Court, District Court, Superior Court, and the Supreme Court. According to our research, the earliest female lawyers who were admitted and are still alive were admitted in the 1950s (1953 and 1957).

Nationally, only two women from Rhode Island have served on the NCWBA board. The first was Mary E. Brooner from Providence in 1991-1995, and the second was Kate Ahern from Providence in 2017-2019.

The story of female attorneys in Rhode Island is dynamic, inspiring, and important. They were not just female attorneys. They were attorneys and mothers, daughters, wives, state senators, elected officials, fearsome litigators, CEOs, judges, newsmakers, standard bearers, glass ceiling breakers, activists, partners, leaders, and icons. They should be remembered for their contributions to the law, to our state, and to the lives of all female attorneys now and to come in Rhode Island.⁶

Endnotes

1. Nicole P. Dyszlewski, is the Head of Reference, Instruction, and Engagement at the Roger Williams University School of Law Library, Gina Renzulli Lemay is the current President of RIWBA, and Cassandra L. Feeney is a member of the Board of Directors for the RIWBA.
2. Aiken, Denise, "Ada L. Sawyer: The Providence Portia," *RI Bar Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Sept./Oct. 2010, pages 31-32. Available at: https://ribar.com/UserFiles/File/Sept-Oct_2010%20Jrnl.pdf
3. Aiken, Denise, "Ada L. Sawyer: The Providence Portia," *Roger Williams University Law Review*, Vol. 16, Iss. 2, Art. 1, 2011. Available at: http://docs.rwu.edu/rwu_LR/vol16/iss2/
4. One hundred seventy-six is the number of female attorneys admitted in Rhode Island in the first 60 years beginning in 1920 researchers have been able to identify at this time. New names and leads are continuously being pursued and this number could increase with new light being shed on these amazing women.
5. The first three women Supreme Court Justices in Rhode Island include the Honorable Florence Murray, the Honorable Victoria Lederberg, and the Honorable Maureen McKenna Goldberg. Tucker, Eric, "Veteran Judge Takes Over Top Spot on R.I. High Court," *South Coast Today*, Jan. 4, 2009. Available at: <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20090104/News/901040336>
6. For more information on the history of female attorneys and their stories, Cassandra L. Feeney and Etie-Lee Schaub author a continuing series published in the *Rhode Island Bar Journal*. See e.g., Cassandra L. Feeney, Esq., and Etie-Lee Schaub, Esq., "Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future – Susan Leach DeBlasio, Esq.," *RI Bar Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 5, March/April 2019, pages 21-22. Available at: [https://ribar.com/UserFiles/RI%20Bar_Mar-Apr_2019\(3\).pdf](https://ribar.com/UserFiles/RI%20Bar_Mar-Apr_2019(3).pdf); Cassandra L. Feeney, Esq., and Etie-Lee Schaub, Esq., "Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future – The Honorable Netti C. Vogel," *RI Bar Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3, Nov/Dec 2018, page 13. Available at: [https://ribar.com/UserFiles/RI%20Bar_Nov-Dec2018_Jrnl\(3\).pdf](https://ribar.com/UserFiles/RI%20Bar_Nov-Dec2018_Jrnl(3).pdf). Additional information about the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association, including newsletters and publications with further information on the history of Rhode Island women attorneys, is available at: <https://www.riwba.com/>

Links to Other Great Reads

[The Amazing Dorothy Crockett](#)

By Michael M. Bowden

*Originally published in the Roger Williams Law Review
May 2019*

[Honoring a Pioneer](#)

By Katie Mulvaney

*Originally published in The Providence Journal
September 2019*

[Trailblazing Judge O. Rogeriee Thompson Reflects on Her Career](#)

By Edward Fitzpatrick

*Originally published in the Boston Globe
September 2021*

[Pushing the Bar 5 Women Who Blazed Trails Through R.I.'s Legal System](#)

By Katie Mulvaney

*Originally published in The Providence Journal
April 2019*