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Judy McKelvey - Celebrating Her Contributions to Golden Gate University School of Law and the Legal Profession

Peter Keane
Golden Gate University School of Law, pkeane@ggu.edu

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Judy McKelvey

Celebrating Her Contributions to Golden Gate University School of Law and the Legal Profession

BY DEAN PETER G. KEANE

udy McKelvey has been a colossus of the legal profession in the Bay Area and in all of California for more than a generation. She broke through glass ceilings long before anyone ever used that term. Along the way, Judy has touched the lives of everyone lucky enough to know her, especially those of us who are blessed with the delightful experience of being her friend.

I first got to know Judy McKelvey when I joined the board of directors of the Bar Association of San Francisco in the early 1980s. Judy was the president of BASF during my first year on the board. She was only the second woman president in the Bar Association's history. At the time, she was also the dean of Golden Gate University School of Law. This was another notable achievement, since Judy was only the second woman in the United States to become dean of an ABA-accredited law school. Although I later followed Judy as both BASF president and law school dean, there is no way that I came close to matching her performance in either one of these positions.

Judy attributes her legal career to her father, Dr. Lionel Grant, a dentist. She was the second of five children who grew up in the middle-class, middle-American heartland of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee. Judy majored in philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, and as graduation approached, her father took her aside for a talk about her future. This was the 1950s, when the career path for most women, if there was to be any career, was just a stopping-off point along the way to marriage and the stay-at-home role of wife and mother.

"My father encouraged me to become a lawyer," Judy says. "One of his main points was that I should be independent and not have to rely on a man in order to exist. This was a radical notion for its time."

Judy graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1959 and went off to Washington, DC. "That's where the jobs were for lawyers," she recalls. She got a job working for the FCC and remained for several years. Then there was a detour for a three-year stay in France, "sixty miles south of Paris. It was great. I put 60,000 miles on my car driving around France." Judy's eyes light up and sparkle as she remembers the delight of her Gallic sojourn.

Back in the United States, she came to San Francisco and cast around for a job as she studied for the California Bar Exam. It was while she was awaiting the Bar results that she began her teaching career, part-time, at Golden Gate University School of Law.

When Judy started teaching at Golden Gate in the fall of 1968, the main building at 536 Mission Street did not exist. The school was housed in the smaller, older building just east of the current main building (and now connected to it). The University student body was about the size of today's freshman entering class; the Law School graduating class of 1968 was less than 45 students. "The entire law school was jammed into

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On the Road
with Judy throughout the Years

. . . relaxing in Mexico, 1972

. . . in Saint Petersburg, Russia

"Bonjour" from Paris, and "Hello" from Maine

the second floor area where the dean's office and half of the faculty offices are now located," Judy recalls. "The Law Library was jammed into a smaller space on the floor below."

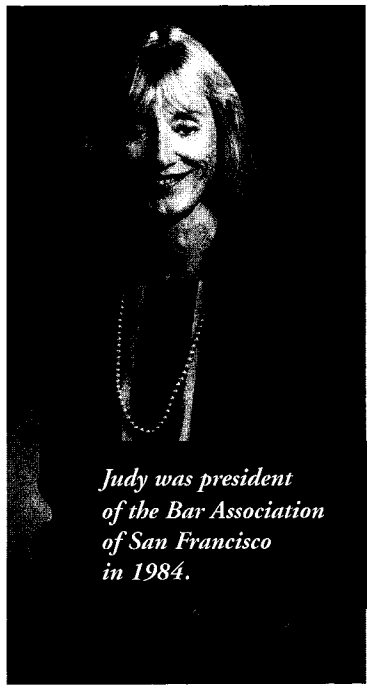
Lani Bader, who was then dean, describes Judy's early tenure: "Judy's energy, sense of humor, and infectious love for the law captivated everyone, student and faculty alike. Right away, we knew we had been blessed with a marvelous resource by getting Judy."

The part-time teaching job that Judy took "temporarily" while waiting for her bar results soon became full-time. Judy had found her true passion: teaching law. Before long, she was recognized as the jewel in the crown of the Law School faculty.

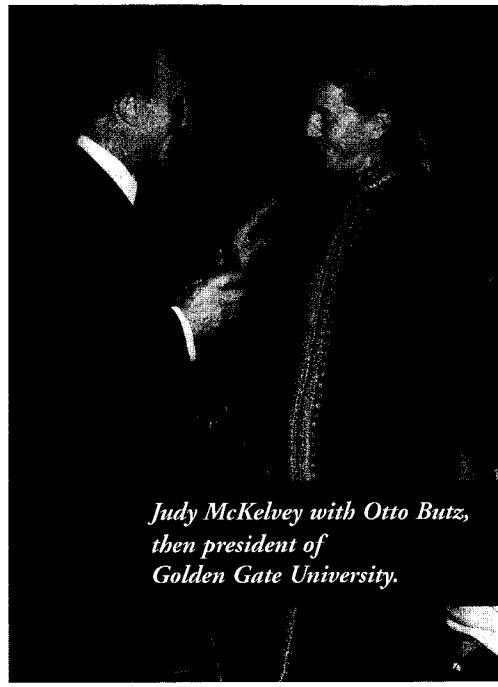
Judy became dean in 1973. She explains, "The big challenge we faced was to become accredited by the AALS (American Association of Law Schools). Golden Gate had received full ABA accreditation in 1971, after many years of provisional accreditation. In order for us to have our identity established as a recognized mainstream law school, the need for AALS accreditation was critical." The accreditation came, and with it came phenomenal growth on the part of the Law School. "This was the '70s," Judy recalls, "and it seemed everyone wanted to become a lawyer. In addition, it was the beginning of a mass movement of women into the practice of law."

Judy's natural dedication and interest in the legal profession, as well as her desire to spread around the Golden Gate University name, motivated her to become involved in Bar Association activities. "The Law School needed as much visibility as it could get in order to enhance its reputation. Being a voice in the Bar Association, and particularly being president, was a wonderful public relations method for getting greater recognition for Golden Gate University Law School among the legal profession and the public."

Judy's practical instincts and basic street smarts combine with a personal grace and eloquence that impress everyone who meets her. Drucilla Ramey, executive director of the Bar Association of San Francisco says, "No one did more to advance women, either in legal education or in the practice of law, than Judy McKelvey. She was one of the founders and one of the first presidents of the California Women Lawyers' Association. Judy had a sophisticated political savvy and a decisiveness about where we should be going that advanced all of us."



Judy was president of the Bar Association of San Francisco in 1984.



Judy McKelvey with Otto Butz, then president of Golden Gate University.

Judy stepped down as dean in 1981, leaving the Law School secure, prosperous, and respected. She continued to teach through the years, and her Property and Constitutional Law students look back on her with fondness and respect. Christine Pagano (92) describes a typical McKelvey class: "She always wore beautiful suits and made an excellent entrance into the classroom. Judy had a habit of leaning up against the board. By the end of class, her suit and hands were covered with chalk."

"No one did more to advance women, either in legal education or in the practice of law, than Judy McKelvey. She had a sophisticated political savvy and a decisiveness about where we should be going that advanced all of us."

Although Judy retires this year from the Law School, she is determined to play a major role in helping the school achieve its next milestone, the construction of a new Law School building. Her other plans include travel and a new phase of active life that she describes as "I'm not sure what, but I'll know it when I see it." Judy retires with a great deal of gratitude owed to her by Golden Gate University School of Law, her colleagues, and a generation of students whose professional careers and lives were molded by her influence. She is a true pioneer and one of a handful of dynamic women lawyers who changed the face of the legal profession in the last part of the 20th century. We can all be proud that the legacy of Judy McKelvey will always be reflected in the vibrance and energy of Golden Gate University School of Law. 📖

Come Celebrate Judy McKelvey

A retirement luncheon in Judy's honor is being planned for Friday, February 25, 2000. For information, please contact Debra Holcomb via e-mail at dholcomb@ggu.edu or by phone at (415) 442-6602.