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Drucilla Stender Ramey

If not for a heart-to-heart talk with a college roommate, Ramey might have become a criminal defense lawyer in D.C. The San Francisco bar would never have been the same.

Scott Graham

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If Barbara Babcock had had her way, Drucilla Ramey would never have transformed the San Francisco legal profession.

Babcock, the public defender of the District of Columbia in the early 1970s, pulled Ramey aside while she was taking a break from law school and said, "You have to decide if you are going to be the great criminal litigator you can be, or just another pretty face in the law."

Ramey was sold. She passed the Connecticut bar while finishing her studies at Yale. "I moved mountains to get into that office as a result of that one statement," she says.

But the night before leaving for D.C., her roommate sat her down and said, "Don't do it. You grew up in Washington, you romanticize your family, you need to start over somewhere else and be your own person."

Instead, Ramey moved to the Bay Area, joining Treuhaft, Walker & Bernstein, a left-wing stalwart in Oakland. Many of her clients were Vietnam veterans and protesters, including a lesbian who'd been kicked out of the army. Ramey hung out with Treuhaft's wife, Jessica Mitford, while firm partner Doris Brin Walker tried the Angela Davis murder trial. "Exciting times," says Ramey.

In about 1974 Ramey joined the growing Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund as a staff attorney. Around this time she also wrote a proposal for a women's rights program at the ACLU of Northern California. The program was approved, but Ramey didn't like the way the executive director had treated her group — for example, refusing to let the group pitch directly to the ACLU board.

"These are the things I've learned when running an organization, you put everyone at the table," Ramey says. "You don't have people sitting at the 'Group W bench.' The less you know about the group, the more respect you show them, to see if they can't come into the organization as equals and help you out."

So Ramey called famed defense lawyer Fay Stender, whom she knew through Treuhaft circles. "And I said listen, we all want to take over this board, and we don't have anything like the stature to be able to do it."

In short order Stender had joined the ACLU board and brought in young turks like Ramey, Thelton Henderson, Cherie Gaines and Iris Mitgang.

"There was a lot of hullabaloo, but we swept onto the board and within a couple of years I was the first woman chair of the ACLU of Northern California," Ramey says.

Asked her top achievement as chair, Ramey doesn't hesitate. "Hiring Dorothy Ehrlich" as executive director. Ehrlich held the job for many years, and today is deputy director of the national ACLU.

During this same period Ramey also helped organize California Women Lawyers (she was a provisional vice president) and was chair of San Francisco's Commission on the Status of Women. She left MALDEF and began teaching at Golden Gate University School of Law.

But with Golden Gate struggling financially in 1985, Ramey set her sights on a new position: executive director of the Bar Association of San Francisco. Ramey wasn't sure if a rabble-rousing liberal like her would be a good fit. After all, the Bar was a creature of downtown corporate law firms.

But incoming President Jerome Falk Jr. — whom Ramey had worked with at ACLU — was alarmed about the upcoming Rose Bird recall campaign and wanted someone committed to the issue and with a track record of organizing lawyers for political causes.

Ramey found, somewhat to her surprise, that she got along fine with the same corporate lawyers she had passionately litigated against. And she quickly developed a reputation as a Midas-touch fundraiser.

But she faced an early challenge when BASF decided to light a fire under law firms' minority hiring and retention practices. The Bar put past President James Brosnahan in charge of the effort, but soon received a letter from Raymond Marshall, then a junior partner at McCutchen, Doyle, Brown & Enersen, on behalf of a group of minority attorneys, suggesting more diversity on the task force.

"So I called up Ray Marshall and I said, 'Look, I don't know who you are, but would you co-chair this committee with Jim Brosnahan and bring in all your friends that you think would be interested?'"

Marshall not only joined the task force; five years later he would become BASF's first African-American president, and in 1998 the president of the State Bar of California.

Ramey left BASF in 1999 to return to the East Coast, where she spent four years running the National Association of Women Judges. She returned to San Francisco and Golden Gate in 2009, where she serves today as dean.

S.F. Superior Court Judge Angela Bradstreet says Ramey has been a monumental player in advancing diversity in the profession. "I don't think I would have been president of the bar association without Dru," says Bradstreet.

Once the managing partner of Carroll, Burdick & McDonough, Bradstreet recalls the impossibility of turning down Ramey when she phoned up for support on BASF initiatives. "She would say, 'Angela ... Drucilla. I'm sure you don't want to be left off the list of the first law firms to support our diversity project for women in the profession.'"

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