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# Judge Baxter's Appeal

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# Judge Baxter

Judge Lee Baxter rises above most  
the most generous living donor i

When Lee Baxter (JD 74) was accepted to Golden Gate Law School, her friends placed bets about how long she'd survive in the program. "One friend brought me a huge bottle — a methuselah — of champagne. He said to me, 'I will bet you this bottle that you will not last two weeks.'

"The most scared I've ever been was when I went to get my law textbooks," she says. "I brought them home, and here's this big ol' torts book, big ol' real-property book. I remember setting them down and looking at them. And I cried. I thought, 'There is no way. I can't read this stuff. I don't even know what a tort is.' And I thought I'd really made a mistake."

Baxter laughs as she recounts her first harrowing days at Golden Gate University in 1971. Yet not only did this spirited, vivacious woman become an attorney and then judge, sitting on tough juvenile, family-law and criminal-law cases for 17 years, she has turned out to be one of Golden Gate's staunchest supporters.

A member of the Alumni Council for five years in the 1980s, Baxter serves on the Law School dean's advisory board and has been on the Golden Gate University board of trustees since 1993. In 1991, she received the Judith McKelvey Award for Excellence for distinction in her field and contributions to the Law School. Golden Gate also presented her with the Amicus Award in 1997 in recognition of her outstanding professional and philanthropic achievements.

For Baxter, giving back to the school is part of her wish to see Golden Gate achieve the reputation and recognition she feels it deserves. During the 1990s, as Baxter planned financial gifts to the university, she wanted them to build something distinctive. Several of her colleagues came up with the idea of a litigation fellowship, and she loved it. "I was obviously interested in seeing good litigators come out of Golden Gate, because what I saw all day [as a judge] were people litigating," she says.



In 1995, she established the Judge Lee D. Baxter Fellowship in Trial Advocacy, which provides a stipend, meaningful employment and valuable networking opportunities to an outstanding graduate of the Law School. She began by giving more than \$60,000 to help fund the Baxter Fellowship and, in 2000, she fully endowed it with a gift of \$323,000 in stock — the largest gift ever given to the university by a living person.

"Golden Gate sure changed my life," Baxter says. "My life is divided: There's Before Law School and After Law School, like BC and AD. I have been really committed to Golden Gate because I felt the school gave me an opportunity to go to law school when other institutions weren't interested in me — I was a housewife out of school for seven years. So I feel I owe Golden Gate a big debt."

# er's Appeal

mountains, ceilings and lack of transportation to become  
in Golden Gate history by **Melissa Stein**



Photos by Kent Taylor

**W**hen Baxter's husband, John, accepted an associate professorship in medicine at UCSF in 1970, the couple and their two young daughters moved from Bethesda, Md., to Marin. Baxter had been teaching junior high and high school for seven years and, in California, she planned to substitute teach part-time to help support the family. But she didn't want to live in the shadow of her husband. She wanted something for herself: to be a lawyer.

In her genial Southern lilt, Baxter recounts:

"Back when I was coming along, there were four things a woman could do: You could be a nurse, a secretary, a social worker or a teacher. All of my family had been teachers, so my mother said, 'Go on and get a teaching certificate. It will always come in handy.' So I did. But I never wanted to teach, really." She applied for a substitute-teaching certificate in California, but when it came in the mail, "I thought, 'I cannot go back in the classroom. I just can't do it.' So I tore it up and acted like it had never come."

While growing up in Kentucky, Baxter didn't know a single lawyer. She had never been in a courtroom. But she was drawn to books and television shows about law (which, she admits, emphasized the glamour of the profession). After she moved to California, she read a book about the Chicago Seven trials and was hooked. "I was fascinated. I started thinking, 'I'll go to law school.'" Her husband was immediately supportive of her plan. Though, at first, her parents "were absolutely aghast," once they saw how determined she

***"My life is divided: There's Before Law School and After Law School. Golden Gate because the school gave me an opportunity to go to law school in me — I was a housewife out of school for seven years. I owe Golden***



*Judge Baxter in a rare relaxing moment at home with Annie and Minnie; horsing around Fort Bragg; toting Minnie through Yosemite National Park; boating*

was, they helped out however they could with finances and childcare.

Baxter took the LSAT cold. She simply walked into the exam without any legal background, without ever having seen a practice test. With a ready smile, she confesses, "My score was terrible." She applied to all the law schools in the Bay Area and was accepted by both Golden Gate and USF. After attending an orientation for first-year law students at Golden Gate, her mind was made up. At 31, "I had thought I was going to be the oldest student in the world there. But I met a couple of women who were in the same boat I was in; they had kids exactly the same age as mine. I was not the only one starting a second career. I was so relieved. I still have close friends from the very first day I walked in that place."

The challenges had just begun. First there was that intimidating mountain of law books to get through. The Baxters had only one car, so every day for a year the mother of two hitchhiked to and from the Golden Gate Transit stop to catch the bus to San Francisco. And, somehow, Baxter had to negotiate five days of full-time classes with raising her children, cooking meals and taking care of the housework. "I can't even imagine that I did that," she laughs. "I was just kind of bumbling along. But other women did it. We were all doing it. And it worked out." The family moved to San Francisco the next year.

After Baxter received her JD in 1974, she was part of a small general civil practice for seven years. She appeared frequently before the superior-court commissioners for discov-

ery work and, in 1982, began a stint as a commissioner herself. Five years later, after sitting on family-law court, probate court and juvenile court as a commissioner, she took the next step. "I figured if I was going to be sitting full-time, I might as well be a judge!" At that time the bench was heavily male-dominated: Only 12 percent to 14 percent of judges were women. But that didn't hinder Baxter: In 1987, she was appointed to the San Francisco Municipal Court by Gov. George Deukmejian, and Gov. Pete Wilson elevated her to the San Francisco Superior Court in 1992.

Baxter was a natural. "I liked being in the courtroom. I liked presiding over trials. I liked working with juries. I had a very varied judicial career; I sat on practically every court." She admits that, despite all her years

**I have been really committed to Golden Gate when other institutions weren't interested in me. I've been on the bench for 17 years, and I've been a big debt."**



and biking Ireland's Aran Islands; and, of course, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro.

on the bench, she never felt completely in her element: "It's too difficult. You're making too many decisions that are too important to other people. I never felt totally secure and confident." But that certainly kept her on her toes. "I learned to listen. I tried very hard — and I think I was successful — at seeing both sides of a problem. I really cared about the decisions I was making and how they were affecting people's lives."

Always wanting to give her alma mater a boost, Baxter hired "externs" exclusively from Golden Gate when she began sitting on superior-court trials. Baxter has always been involved in a wide range of extracurricular legal activities, including the Queen's Bench, San Francisco Lawyer's Club, California Women Lawyers and the San Francisco Family Violence Council, of which she was a founder.

Peter Keane, dean of Golden Gate University School of Law, who has worked closely with Baxter during the past 20 years, holds her in the highest esteem: "If someone wanted to model their career after Lee Baxter's, they'd be setting very high standards for themselves. It was a pleasure to be in her court. The university and Law School are blessed to have someone like Lee taking the interest she does and being as supportive as she is."

In 1999, after 17 years on the bench, Baxter decided it was time to retire. Retiring was "a cumulative decision. I had been working or going to school all my life. You get to a certain age and you think, 'I'd like to be free.' I was still young enough and in good health and kept seeing people wait too long, and I didn't want that to be me. It's a

hard decision, because you do give up certain things, like being in the swing of the legal community — though I'm still involved in it peripherally." One way she stays involved is through her unwavering support of Golden Gate Law School. "Golden Gate was the perfect place for me, and I've always felt that I wanted to help the school. Setting up the Baxter Fellowship has been really exciting."

These days, Baxter's biggest challenge is finding time to do all the things she wants to do, especially travel. She visits Africa every other year, and she has been scuba diving in Papua New Guinea, Borneo, Indonesia, Micronesia, the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. Her home is filled with masks, jewelry and carvings from her expeditions around the world. Last year, Baxter even climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro — six days up and two days down. "It was a wonderful experience — although I wouldn't do it again!"

That reaction pretty much sums up Baxter's take on the world: "Everything about my life has been so much more than I could ever have dreamed. Even the things I didn't particularly enjoy at the time were valuable learning experiences that have added to the layers and textures of my life."

So whatever happened to that giant bottle of champagne, the one bet against her making it through law school?

Baxter smiles her infectious smile. "When I graduated and passed the bar, we drank it!" **GGU**