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Introducing The Recorder's Women Leaders in the Law

The Recorder honors 19 practicing lawyers who made big headlines while achieving tangible results.

Scott Graham

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The 20 pioneers who make up *The Recorder's* Women Leaders in Law have many things in common, but ultimately they all found their own way to success.

All 20 went to law school in the 1960s and early '70s, and many experienced hostility from male professors that felt gender-based. "We as women felt vulnerable and we were often called to stand up in class, which we felt was disproportionate," says Joan Messing Graff of the Legal Aid Society-Employment Law Center. "We felt like we were being made fun of. It was in no way a welcoming or accepting environment."

Once in practice, many women experienced the same sort of challenges from male colleagues and adversaries. Some made an effort to blend in — Wilson Sonsini partner Judith O'Brien practiced swearing so she could feel more comfortable with male securities lawyers. Conversely, MoFo's Michèle Corash was happy to stand out, opting sometimes for pink go-go boots and short skirts. "It may have had the effect of eliminating some opportunities," Corash says, but it created others.

Judge Mary Morgan stood out, too, as the first openly lesbian woman appointed to the bench. But she didn't want to be defined only by that, and worked to make her mark on judicial education and behavioral health court. "Women tend to be more collaborative, more of problem-solvers," she says. "I think these things often draw women judges to problem-solving or collaborative courts."

Today, *The Recorder* is honoring these 20 women for helping blaze the trail in the profession decades ago. These living legends are firsts and founders — the first women partners at big law firms, the first (or second) women judges on their courts. Not surprisingly for women who were educated during the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War, several have founded/and or piloted influential public interest organizations like Equal Rights Advocates, California Women Lawyers and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights in the Bay Area.

Most have mentored other young women, though a few acknowledge it could be a challenge juggling career, family and young attorneys. And most say they strongly believe the profession must address work-life balance issues, for women and for men.

But all 20 have provided leadership and inspiration. As California Supreme Court Justice Joyce Kennard puts it, she's "become a field trip" for law clerks and other young women and men seeking guidance on their careers and their lives.

A few caveats about this list must be noted. *The Recorder* limited eligibility to women in the San Francisco Bay Area who have been attorneys for at least 35 years, and whose focus has been on practicing, teaching or adjudicating law. We acknowledge the trailblazing contributions of many, many others who became lawyers more recently (and will celebrate their achievements in the future), or whose impact has been primarily in the political rather than legal arena.

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Judith McKelvey, Golden Gate University School of Law

One of the first women law school deans in the country, she "broke through glass ceilings long before anyone ever used that term."

Erik Cummins

2011-09-12 02:44:35 PM

Taking a part-time teaching job while she awaited her California Bar results, Judith McKelvey went on to spend more than 30 years at Golden Gate University School of Law and served as its dean during a time of pivotal growth for the school in the 1970s.

McKelvey was only the second woman to become dean of an ABA-accredited law school in California, and was among the early women leaders of the Bar Association of San Francisco and the California Women Lawyers Association.

"The mid-'70s were an extraordinary time to be the dean of any American law school, but it was especially so at Golden Gate," McKelvey recalled in a written history of the school. "The civil rights movement, the women's movement and the Warren Supreme Court had collectively produced a massive interest in going to law school among women, minorities and activists who believed they could make American society more just."

McKelvey joined the school's faculty in 1968 and was appointed dean in 1973. At the time, the school was rapidly growing and McKelvey hoped to achieve the coveted Association of American Law Schools accreditation. Seven years later and after adding faculty, increasing salaries, moving into a new building and expanding its library, the school was so honored. According to a profile of McKelvey upon her retirement from teaching in 1999, she said she considered the designation her most important achievement as dean.

McKelvey, who lives today in Marin County, was not available to be interviewed.

Drucilla Ramey, the former executive director of the Bar Association of San Francisco and the law school's current dean, describes McKelvey as having "a sophisticated political savvy and decisiveness about where we should be going that advanced all of us."

Another former dean of the school, Peter Keane, said McKelvey "broke through glass ceilings long before anyone ever used that term."

In 1974, McKelvey was part of the group that organized California Women Lawyers, and served as the group's first regular president in 1975. (Joan Dempsey Klein earlier served as the organization's provisional president.)

She also became involved in the Bar Association of San Francisco, becoming its second woman president in 1985. Criticism of then-Chief Justice Rose Bird was reaching a fever pitch at the time, and one of McKelvey's initiatives was promoting the independence of the judiciary. It was also around that time that BASF was seeking a new executive director — it would turn to Ramey, who had been teaching at Golden Gate.

McKelvey served as dean of Golden Gate until 1981 and returned to teaching constitutional and property law full time.

Growing up in Wauwatosa, Wis., near Milwaukee, she earned her undergraduate and law degrees at the University of Wisconsin. "My father encouraged me to become a lawyer," McKelvey once said. "One of his main points was that I should be independent and not rely on a man in order to exist. That was a radical notion at the time."

McKelvey worked several years for the Federal Communications Commission in Washington, D.C., before moving to the Bay Area and joining Golden Gate in 1968, when the school's graduating class numbered only 45 students.

Lani Bader, who preceded her as dean, told Golden Gate's Class Action magazine upon her retirement that McKelvey's "energy, sense of humor and infectious love for the law captivated everyone, students and staff alike."

Ramey added in that publication, "No one did more to advance women, either in legal education or the practice of law, than Judy McKelvey."

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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

2011-09-12 02:59:31 PM

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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