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THE FACE OF *a Lawyer*

An oral history of trailblazing women in Illinois law



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Left to Right: PATTI BOBB, A. MARCY NEWMAN, LAUREL BELLOWS, JANE WALLER, GEMMA ALLEN

Also Featured: ANN C. TIGHE, BARBARA STEINER

THE FACE OF *a Lawyer*

An oral history of trailblazing women in Illinois law

BY STEVE KNOPPER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD ROSENBERG

In the early '70s, when A. Marcy Newman showed up on her first day at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, she was one of about 10 women in a class of 210 students, and some professors didn't know what to do. One brought up a case involving a woman who'd suffered pain and damage during a hairdresser appointment, and pointedly invited Newman to comment. "This is closer to you than the rest of us," he declared—but his assumptions were wrong. Newman had been a counterculture hippie at the University of Wisconsin, toasting marshmallows with thousands of others after protesters firebombed a grocery store. "Well, I don't go to the hairdresser," she told him. "I'm sure your wife does. Maybe you can answer that."

Such was life for women back then, just before the U.S. passed Title IX civil-rights legislation, which provided for equality in classrooms. They had to contend with discriminatory professors, tiny bathrooms, and patriarchal judges who called them "girls." On occasion, they had to deal with assault. Seven Illinois attorneys remember those days of frustration and revolution. "We were kind of brazen and insisted that women be recognized as equal," Newman recalls.

WHY LAW?



Barbara Steiner, of counsel, Jenner & Block, antitrust, University of Michigan Law School 1974: My father was a

lawyer—practiced more than 50 years. My grandmother was working for decades for a law firm as an office manager or paralegal, although they didn't have those terms then. Before I applied for law school, my father actually tried to talk me out of it. It wasn't that he didn't think I could do it, but to the extent he knew women lawyers, they all were working in the back room. Why work that hard to be in the back room? You wanted to be with the people in the courtroom with clients. By the time I was in law school, he completely forgot he had said that and became one of my biggest fans.



Patti Bobb, owner, Patricia C. Bobb & Associates, medical malpractice, Notre Dame Law School 1972: My dad

was a lawyer, and he and I were very close. I used to go to court with him.



Laurel Bellows, founding managing principal, The Bellows Law Group, employment and labor, Loyola University Chicago School of Law 1974: My mother



A. Marcy Newman's (middle row, center) first job as an attorney involved working with the North Lawndale Economic Development Corporation.

was always an advocate of financial independence for women—well, for me. At that time the choices were teaching and nursing, neither of which was of interest to me. She said, "Fine, so choose between law school and business."



A. Marcy Newman, founder, Law Offices of A. Marcy Newman, family law, Case Western Reserve University School of Law 1973: My father was an attorney. In the summers, I would work for him, answering the phones, and never did I receive a phone call from a woman attorney. If it was a woman, it was always someone's secretary. I was raised to believe that education was paramount and that I could do anything I wanted if I put my mind to it. So I wanted to go to law school, and I did.

LAW SCHOOL: "THERE WAS A CRITICAL MASS FORMING"



Jane Waller, partner, Schiller DuCanto & Fleck, family law, University of Illinois College of Law 1973: It was August

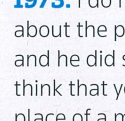
20, 1970. There was a woman's strike day in Chicago, and the plan was for women to gather in Daley Plaza, where the courthouse is, to protest in favor of the passage of the ERA. I was with all the other women who had put down their ironing

boards and put away their mops and didn't do the laundry that day or make the beds or cook the food. And when I got back, there was a message from the dean at the University of Illinois College of Law that I had been accepted to law school to start in September of 1970.

Steiner: I was really in the transition. I was told that the class ahead of me at Michigan had 3% women, my class had about 7% and the class after me had 25%.

Newman: The very first year, they published a book that had everybody's name, address and phone number, and every one of us got a dirty phone call that night.

Ann C. Tighe, partner, Cotsirilos, Tighe, Streicker, Poulos & Campbell, white collar criminal defense, Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law 1973: I do remember speaking to a man about the possibility of going to law school and he did say, "Well, what makes you think that you, as a woman, can take the place of a man in law school?" I wasn't discouraged by that, just disgusted. I just walked away.



Gemma Allen, founder and partner, Allen & Glassman, family law, University of Michigan Law School: Even during exams, the ladies' room was God-

knows-where, compared to the men's room being right outside. When you're on a timed exam, that matters.

Bellows: Either we were ignored or called upon with frequency. And every time one of the women was called upon to speak, the entire class went silent, to hear what she had to say, to see if it was right or wrong, and what the reaction was of the professor. We became quite articulate and succinct. We learned not to say too much, because every extra word cost us an additional explanation.

Waller: We had two little stalls down in the basement, whereas the men had a big one on the first floor and another one down in the basement. We also were not too happy about the fact that there weren't any women law professors. We made our

complaints known to the dean and the faculty and we were getting nowhere. So we had a strategy. Five minutes before the end of class, before the bell rang, all the women would get up and walk out. We did that over the course of several weeks, and the dean took notice and called us in for a meeting. And these are his words that I remember very clearly: "Now, girls, we can't have this happen anymore—but what do you want us to do so that we can get you to stop?" We told him we wanted a restroom on the first floor, which we got; and, during my years at law school, we got a woman professor.

Bellows: Everybody came to the understanding that you could serve on law review but you weren't going to be editor of law review if you were a woman.

Waller: There was a critical mass forming. We had 10% [women] in our class and that was starting to be a percentage that couldn't be ignored. We had strength in our numbers.

Bellows: Title IX was passed. I was in my second year when law-school classes went from very few women to one-third.

Allen: My last year in law school, my son was born in July, and the last exams were May or June. The exams were being given in the carrels above the library. They used to have these winding stairs up to the carrels. So I went up to the first carrel with my professor and it was filled. They were all filled on that level. Then we got up to the next level, he was like, "If these are all filled, I'm going to give you the grade you [already] had." I think he was really terrified that, with all these stairs, I was going to give birth! As my luck would have it, there was an empty carrel, so I did have to take the exam.

FINDING A JOB

Bellows: I decided I wanted to be a trial lawyer, [which was] not possible for women at that time. It was very difficult to get a job.

Steiner: It depended on the firm. I did actually have one [interviewer] who was the brother of a friend of mine, who looked at my transcript and said, "Wow, you've got good grades for a girl."

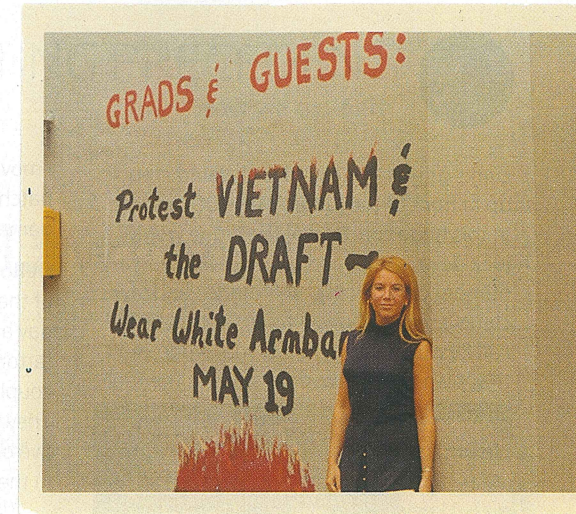
Newman: I tried to interview for a job as counsel in a bank in California. And they said they would hire me for counsel, but pay me a teller's salary.

Allen: I moved to Florida for a lot of reasons—if you've lived in Ann Arbor for a while, good climate has a lot of appeal. When I was practicing in Florida, I'm not going to mention any names, but it felt like the choices were either people were going to chase me around a desk or send me for coffee. So we didn't stay in Florida.

Steiner: The head of the [Jenner & Block] hiring committee was a woman partner; her name was Joan Hall. My hiring class, believe it or not, in 1974, was 50% women. Joan tells the story that when Bert Jenner figured out there were 50% women in our class, he called her in to say, "Do you know you've hired 50% women?" And she looked at him and said, "Yes." And he just said, "Oh," and then dropped it.

Allen: I went to a big meeting in a conference room—multiple lawyers on a multiple-issue situation. There were easily 25 lawyers in a room. I was the only woman and at least three people asked me to get them coffee. I would just say, "You know what, can you get me coffee?" Or, "Is there someone here to get us coffee?"

Bellows: I heard there was a lawyer looking to train a woman to be a trial lawyer. I went to see him and asked him why. He said, "OK, I'm going to spend a lot of time training you to be a trial lawyer, and you can't get a job anyplace else as a trial lawyer, so you're not going to leave me, and you're certainly not going to take my clients and start your own firm, because there's no client that's going to hire you at this time." I said, "OK, that's true." Then he said, "Women build relationships with strangers faster than men. I put you up within 12 inches of a 12-person jury, you'll build a relationship with that jury much stronger, much faster, than any male trial lawyer." He said, "I'll hire you to try cases." And he did. You need to know that he didn't let me try cases for clients really fast. But several years later, we were married.



Laurel Bellows on her undergrad graduation day at the University of Pennsylvania in 1969.

EARLY FIRM AND COURTROOM BATTLES

Allen: You're not going to meet anyone who didn't have some pass made at them in those days. Believe me.

Tighe: There were other women in the U.S. attorney's office—not a lot, but women were starting to get more involved and be more accepted.

Bobb: Early on, in private, I'd just say, "Judge, could I talk to you a minute? You may not realize what you're doing, but to call me 'dear' or 'honey' or come down on me in a different way in a courtroom just isn't appropriate, and you need to stop." And they did.

Allen: I tell the story about having done a brief and I hand-delivered it on the due date. And I remember someone assuming I was a secretary and telling me compliments to my boss. I was really angry and mortified. It was a really hard brief.

Tighe: In one of the cases, the judge let us talk to the jurors afterwards, and the jurors hilariously talked about liking my clothes.

Bobb: There were still very, very few women. They wrote an article about me in the *Sun-Times*, calling me the Iron Butterfly—I guess because I was able to maintain some degree of femininity and still be tough. I always thought of it as a compliment.

Bellows: When I began practicing law, this would be 1976, the state trial call was one large courtroom where all the lawyers who had cases that were up for trial that week would attend. I would easily be the only woman there, other than some law

clerks or secretaries. When I would step up in front of the judge, with 300 lawyers in this huge courtroom, the judge would look down at me and say, "I've told you a number of times that secretaries and law clerks are not allowed to answer the trial call." I would say, "I heard you, judge—that's why I'm a lawyer answering the trial call."

Newman: I once [was] walking down the stairs at Cook County Courthouse, and this guy—I knew him and he was from a firm—was in front of me. And he turned around and grabbed me incredibly inappropriately. I didn't do a damn thing about it; it was such a shock that you stand there like a deer in headlights. Things like that happened all the time.

Allen: I remember [an opposing] lawyer, who shall remain nameless, literally sputtering, and saying, "Ah, ah, she—she doesn't even talk like a lawyer!" I guess I spoke in, you know, feminine tones. But I certainly was speaking the law. Because I prevailed.

PICKING A FOCUS: "SHE WOULD NOT HAVE ANYBODY BUT ME"

Allen: My mother's best friend got a divorce, and she would not have anybody but me. And that's actually how I became a divorce lawyer, in spite of begging off 1,000 times, telling her it was an old boys' network and I was neither a boy nor an old boy nor in the network. She just kept saying, "I don't care, I'd rather have someone I can trust than someone I don't know." Some clients by then wanted a woman lawyer, in family law particularly.

Waller: The circuit judges are elected and the associate judges are appointed, and I had the support of enough circuit judges that I was appointed to be an associate judge in Lake County. Some of my fellow judges would kid me: "Oh, you know, judges are supposed to wear ties when they go into the courtroom and you don't have your tie on." Another judge told me, "The problem with you, Jane, is that you're just too nice, so you're going to have to be a little bit harsher in the way you handle cases." It caused me some concern, like, "Am I really measuring up? Can I do this?" In the end, my style was just my style. Working in family court, having the ability to listen and have some sense of "how can

I move these people through this rough patch in their lives so their kids aren't damaged too badly?" helped.

Bellows: In 1991-1992, I was president of the Chicago Bar, and I woke up one day and I said, "I wonder how women [attorneys] are doing." So I called up a couple and had them join me for breakfast. They said, "Sure, we'll come." I expected five or six or seven, and 70 women walked in the door of the Chicago Bar Association.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Tighe: Women are much more accepted as lawyers. I don't think anybody would say, like they said to me, "What makes you think you can take the place of a man as a lawyer?" Over time, it's become much more acceptable and routine. And people are more understanding and more comfortable with childcare arrangements and things like that.

Waller: I'm sure there's over 50% women practicing in family court. The fact that women have been more and more involved has had an impact on how we handle family cases—there's a lot more mediation, there's a lot more effort to provide coordination so parents have some guidance on how they're going to manage their children after a divorce. And when I retired [from the bench], I said, "Boy, I really am glad that I was the first woman judge in Lake County—but I was not the last." Now we have a whole panel of

women judges in Lake County and they're leaders and effective and respected.

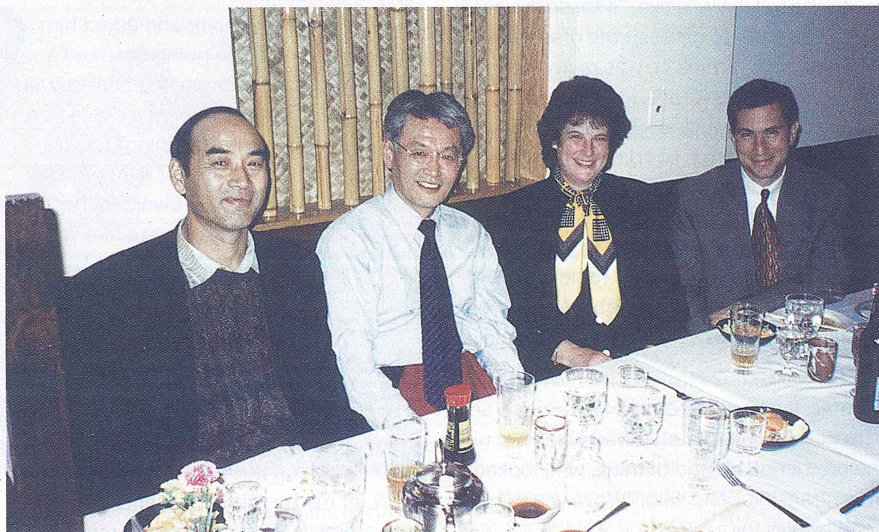
Allen: The last time I looked at the statistic, women partners were still 15%. I guess it's up from whatever it used to be, but that's not a great representation.

Newman: I had a case where my client was the husband, but he didn't show up for something. So the judge was a woman, her clerk was a woman, the other side's lawyer was a woman, and her client was a woman. We started to giggle. We had never been in a courtroom that was all women.

Bobb: Things have changed much for the better. I sort of knew it would happen just by virtue of the numbers of women in law school that have been steadily increasing over the years.

Newman: When my daughter was a little girl, you'd ask her what she wanted to do—"a teacher." A few years later, I said, "What do you want to do?" "I want to be a lawyer." I said, "A few years ago, you said you want to be a teacher, now you want to be a lawyer?" She went, "Better clothes." And she's a lawyer now!

Bellows: The face of a lawyer, particularly in litigation, was six feet tall with silver hair and tortoise-shell glasses. The face of a lawyer was never a woman. So the influx of women was almost a subconscious change in the legal profession. We have women in all areas of practice, and we have women who are the face of the legal profession. SL



Barbara Steiner (third from left) meets with clients from Hitachi.