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A visionary for justice reform

Harriet Ellis served bar community, courts across four decades

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The old standard Harriet Wilson Ellis would serenade her colleagues, friends, and family from behind the keys of her baby grand piano is how her colleagues, confidantes and friends will remember her.

“There Will Never Be Another You.”

Ellis, who started her career in marketing and public relations, turned her passion for equal justice into a nearly 50-year career with the American Bar Association, Court TV, the National Equal Justice Library and the office of former Illinois Supreme Court Justice Mary Ann G. McMorro.

Ellis died on Sept. 30 at 81.

“Harriet had such an illustrious career,” said Michelle M. Jochner, a partner at Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP. “Harriet was not an attorney, but she is known so much throughout the legal community because of all the good work that she did throughout her career. ... Harriet had a life-long desire to make the world a better place.”

Ellis joined the ABA in 1969 as an assistant to the director of communications. By 1974, she took staff roles with legal advisory committees on fair trials and free press, and was staff director for AV communications.

Ellis left the ABA in 1976 to become director of public



Harriet Wilson Ellis plays piano at an event for the Chicago Help Initiative. Ellis, who held roles in legal organizations, government agencies and the judiciary over her long career, died in September.

Photo provided by Jacqueline Hayes

affairs and bar relations for the Legal Services Corp. in Washington, D.C.

In the late '70s, Ellis worked under then-LSC chairwoman Hillary Rodham Clinton expand civil legal services to indigent and poor people. Ellis was the organization's liaison with Congress, the executive branch, the press and the bar.

Ellis returned to the ABA staff in 1980, where she directed the Young Lawyers division. That's where she met Rachel Patrick, who now serves as staff director at the ABA.

The two bonded, Patrick said, because the of challenges they faced in their

lives and at work — Ellis as a Jewish woman, Patrick as a Black woman.

“In 1979, I was interested in affirmative action because diversity was not even a word we used back in 1979,” Patrick said of her first boss at the ABA.

Patrick recalls Ellis spearheading the first diversity conference for ABA presidents. Patrick said it brought together bar groups representing attorneys of color and ABA affiliate organizations to talk about the future of the profession.

“This was her idea, and it was the best conference I have ever been to in my life,” she said. “This was in 1980 and not knowing that I

would do a thousand more of these (conferences) later.”

Patrick said she and Ellis would have dinner once a month until the pandemic started in March.

“She was my mentor, my friend,” Patrick said. “We stayed in contact up until her death, a little more than 41 years.”

After 10 years in those roles, Ellis branched out. She was a vice president of programming and research at the original iteration of Court TV; a reporter for the New York State Bar Association's Task Force on the Solo and Sole Practitioner; the consulting director of development and acquisitions for

the Chicago office of the National Equal Justice Library; and the board of directors liaison for the American Judicature Society in Chicago.

In 2000, she joined the U.S. Agency for International Development and its “Rule of Law” project in the Palestinian territories. Ellis helped USAID officials develop judicial training and court management programs. She also helped create computerized research labs for the Palestinian judiciary.

From her office in Chicago, Ellis organized a legal exchange program with four schools in the West Bank and Gaza and with the DePaul University College of Law, the John Marshall Law School and the Northern Illinois University College of Law. The program also partnered with the Arab American Bar Association to help

Palestinian law professors learn about American legal education.

Sana’a Hussien, of the Law Offices of Sana’a Hussien in Orland Park, said she remembers the coordination Ellis did for the project, organizing schedules, translating materials into Arabic and gathering biographical information of participants.

“Everything has to get vetted in order for us to deliver once we got there,” Hussien said. “The logistics of getting us to the different schools in the West Bank and Gaza (was great). And this was 20 years ago.”

Ellis was a secretary to Chief Justice McMorrow from 2003-05, preparing the judge’s remarks and correspondences.

Jochner, who met Ellis while clerking for McMorrow, said a typical person would have no sense that Ellis was close to some of

the most powerful people in the world just from speaking with her.

“She was such a humble person, and she would never brag about what she did in her past,” Jochner said. “When I would visit her at her home, I would marvel at some of the photos that she had, because it was a ‘who’s who’ of the Washington, D.C., power structure. That was a testament to the gravity of her career.”

Ellis later worked for the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority until she retired in 2016.

Ellis, nicknamed the “Piano Lady,” was also an accomplished pianist and would play from a deep catalog of songs at local legal functions, events and at restaurants if the piano was open and available.

Jacqueline Hayes, who founded the Chicago Help Initiative, a nonprofit fight-

ing homelessness, asked Ellis to play music at nearly all the group’s events, including the weekly meals for the underprivileged. Hayes recalled instances when Ellis would be greeted with a “Hey, Piano Lady!” on the street by someone the people who attended.

Jochner remained in close contact with Ellis. It pained her when her schedule went awry and she’d forget to call Ellis back. Ellis always understood and never batted an eye.

“I would always apologize,” Jochner said. “She’d say ‘Honey, don’t you worry about that. Been there, done that.’ She knew what it was like because she had been so busy in her career and pulled in so many different directions. I would say ‘I so appreciate your friendship because ... if I can’t back to you, you’ll get back to me.’”