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Academic Excellence and Uniqueness





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Trustee Provides Leadership to Law School Committee: Victoria Lederberg



If Roger Williams College Trustee Victoria Lederberg's varied roles were chapeaux, she would be a milliner's dream — wearing many hats, and wearing each superbly well: Secretary to the Board of Trustees and Vice-Chair of the Law School Committee. Fourteen-year state legislator (she did not stand for election in 1990 to make a bid for the Democratic nomination for Mayor of Providence, a race she lost by a scant 200 votes). Rhode Island College Professor of Psychology. Attorney (estates and corporate law). Democratic Party activist. Nationally-known educator and author. East Side civic leader. Wife. Mother — to name but a few.

To say that Victoria Lederberg is a woman of great accomplishment is to understate the case. A Providence native, her life has been marked by notable achievements since her senior year at Brown University, where she earned an A.B. degree in biology cum laude and married husband Seymour, now a professor of biology at Brown, in her senior year. She later earned a Master of Arts degree in biology from Brown, but switched to psychology for her Doctoral degree. In 1976, she earned a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree from Suffolk University Law School.

In a far-ranging interview, Trustee Lederberg discussed her 11-year association with Roger Williams College including her instrumental role in promoting the new Library, and in establishing a committee to explore the feasibility of a Law School at the College; her views on government, politics and education. Following are some excerpts.

On the Proposed Law School

After meeting for a year, the 15-member blue-ribbon Committee to explore the feasibility of establishing a Law School at Roger Williams College still plans an announcement of its findings early in 1991, according to Dr. Lederberg.

Preliminary accreditation by the American Bar Association (ABA) within three years of the Law School's opening would be the goal of the Committee, she stated. (Final accreditation cannot occur until five years after a law school's founding).

"We would not recommend embarking on a Law School unless we believed that the school could achieve ABA accreditation . . . There is absolutely no interest in running a high-risk enterprise. We want a quality school," she emphasized.

In the event the Committee's report is positive about the possibility of establishing a Law School at Roger Williams College, that document would "likely be used as a basis for a fully-developed feasibility study by the College," a requirement before a Law School could actually be established. Such a feasibility study normally takes at least a year, but because the Committee's findings would constitute raw data, that period might be shortened, Dr. Lederberg said.

"The earliest that the Law School could be established, if the feasibility study supported its creation, would be fall of 1992," she stated.

Site for the proposed facility and "creation of an adequate law library" have been major Committee considerations.

"It would be important to have the Law School located in or near Providence to provide immediate access to the courts. The Site Selection Subcommittee is reviewing several locations, buildings or sites that would meet all requirements."

The minimum number of 30,000 volumes in the law library required for accreditation dictates that the building be structurally able to support their weight, she pointed out. Raj Saksena, AIA, dean of the Roger Williams College School of Architecture, a Committee member, has assisted in evaluating the suitability of existing structures.

With three of the five Rhode Island Supreme Court justices (The Hon. Joseph R. Weisberger, Committee chair; The Hon. Thomas F. Kelleher and The Hon. Donald F. Shea); The Hon. Anthony A. Giannini, presiding justice, Rhode Island Superior Court; and The Hon. Albert E. DeRobbio, chief judge, Rhode Island District Court, the Law School Committee is very distinguished.

"This [Committee composition] would be important to the College in the event a Law School were established because the Rhode Island Supreme Court regulates admission to the Rhode Island Bar and oversees the practice of law in the state," Dr. Lederberg stated.

There has been "lots of widespread interest in serving on the Committee; a substantial number of individuals came forward and volunteered. They were very responsive and wanted us to go forward," she added.

The market for a law school education is "considerable," according to Dr. Lederberg.

"By no means all who apply seek to go into practice; a law degree is becoming the preferred advanced degree in many disciplines," she said.

On Campaign Reform

Calling her recent Mayoral race "a good experience," Dr. Lederberg says she does not regret giving up her State Senate

seat (she had represented the East Side of Providence for six years in the Senate, and for eight years before that in the State House of Representatives).

"I was ready to do something else. Serving in the Rhode Island Legislature was worthwhile and rewarding, but I wanted to be in a position to impact more directly on public policy."

She favors a limitation or rotation of terms, "no matter how effective the legislator, to give the voters a true choice," as well as a self-imposed cap on campaign spending (she had proposed a maximum \$225,000 per candidate limit in the Providence Mayoral Democratic Primary, but says the other candidates wouldn't agree).

As recent election results demonstrated, incumbents now enjoy such a large financial edge that few races are truly contested, she stated.

"Many good candidates, like myself, are unwilling to incur major long-term debt for a campaign. Women candidates, especially, are at a disadvantage in fund-raising because traditionally, they don't get the same financial support as male candidates."

On Education

"I won't be easily silenced in my desire to improve the quality of education," said Dr. Lederberg, who in addition to being a College professor for 20 years, has chaired the National Advisory Panel on Financing Elementary and Secondary Education, and was Deputy Majority Leader for Health, Education and Welfare in the Rhode Island State Senate until her recent retirement.

Dr. Lederberg's strong feelings about education are apparent in her proposals for reform, some of which include:

- "Less bureaucracy, more parental involvement."
- "Get the political influence out of School Boards. Education should not be a political entity."
- "Fund more early intervention programs. Head Start is reaching only 25-30 percent of the children whom it could help. We need to free up resources to help the rest."
- "Develop new models for training teachers which include the use of master teachers."
- "Address the social reasons behind the high drop-out rates, including teenage pregnancy, which has become almost epidemic."
- "Guarantee college tuition for minority teachers who would then commit to teaching in the inner-city schools for a period of time. In Providence, 63 percent of public school students are from minority groups; only 7 percent of teachers are."

On the Future of Roger Williams College

Dr. Lederberg has been on the College Board of Trustees since 1979, and in addition to other responsibilities, has chaired the Library Committee of the

"I won't be easily silenced in my desire to improve the quality of education."

Board, and also serves on its Educational Policy and Honorary Degree committees.

"It seems no week goes by without at least one meeting," she said. In her 11 years of active involvement, Dr. Lederberg has seen "remarkable improvement in facilities and in the campus as a whole."

"The College is coming to a real maturity of resources and staffing . . . I hope that we can now move forward to develop human and physical resources," Dr. Lederberg emphasized.

On Her Own Future

While she doesn't rule out another run for office, "It's not on my mind right now." She will continue her professorial duties at Rhode Island College, along with numerous civic and philanthropic endeavors. Also in the offing is a book, "The Psychology of Women," for which she is under contract to Simon & Schuster.

Dr. Lederberg also wants to spend more time with husband Seymour and two children, son Tobias, a law student at Boston University, and daughter Sarah, working toward a Master of Fine Arts degree in costume design at Brandeis University.

"We enjoy travel, study and research," she says of her husband and herself.

There's little concern that 1991 holds anything less than continued excellence and commitment to all which Dr. Lederberg holds dear. Roger Williams College is fortunate to be near the top of this dedicated Trustee's list.

— Betty M. van Iersel, APR

Ed. Note: In the Fall 1990 issue of The Bridge, the "Leadership Profile" feature on Trustee Bob Rizzo incorrectly stated that the Rhode Island Chapter, National Multiple Sclerosis Society was founded in 1988. The local chapter was established in 1953. Mr. Rizzo organized the Multiple Sclerosis Benefit Golf Tournament for the chapter for the first time in 1988. The tournament is one of several annual major fund-raising events for the chapter. We regret the error.