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Recommended Citation

Vogel, Netti, "Trending @ RWU Law: Judge Netti Vogel's Post: Women, the Legal Profession, and How Far We've Come 7-19-16" (2016). *Law School Blogs*. 445.

https://docs.rwu.edu/law_pubs_blogs/445

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Judge Netti Vogel's Post

July 19, 2016

Women, the Legal Profession, and How Far We've Come

Posted by Netti Vogel on 07/19/2016 at 09:21 PM



Later this month, Democrats will meet in Philadelphia to nominate a woman as the party's candidate for president. Unrelated to political partisanship, this historic event highlights the dramatic changes undergone by women in our society — changes I have witnessed and experienced firsthand.

Coincidentally, Hillary Clinton and I were born the same year, in the same city and raised a stone's throw away from each other, although we did not know each other. We were children of the 1950s, teens of the 1960s, and feminist activists of the 1970s. We grew up in a male-dominated society in which every aspect of a woman's life was restricted. It was an era when a woman's status depended solely on her husband's economic and social success. As children, we played a card game, the object of which was to avoid ending up with the lone unmatched card, the "old maid." Those women who did work outside the home could expect low-paying jobs. Even those who achieved academic success were limited to working as teachers, nurses, or secretaries. Four and a half decades after women won the right to vote, the world of American women remained limited in almost every respect.

And then came the 1970s and the birth of the second wave of feminism — a powerful wave that captured me and my contemporaries and catapulted us to heights we never could have imagined as children. Women activists brought equal rights to the forefront and banded together to fight for

change. Twenty-eight women formed NOW, the National Organization for Women, and, before long, local chapters sprung up across America. In 1972, fueled with excitement and anticipation, I walked into the basement of the old YWCA building in Providence to attend my first NOW meeting. 1972 also was the year I began law school.

My fellow women law students and I sensed the age-old barriers were breaking down, but, at the time, we only could see subtle cracks. Women comprised just 10% of my law school class. In the class directly ahead of us, only 5% of the law students were female. This was a time when women made up less than 3% of lawyers in this country. Many of our male classmates and even some professors resented us for taking places that could have been filled by men; men, they said, were certain to practice law while we, as women, would make little use of our degrees before starting a family and devoting our lives to homemaking.

There was a fledgling group of women lawyers in Rhode Island who met for dinner once a month. As a law student, I was invited to join that group. Together, we filled only one table. At that table included young lawyers embarking on their legal careers: Haiganush Bedrosian, Alice Gibney, Pamela Macktaz; and another law student, Doris Licht. We networked, and, over the years, we enjoyed a level of camaraderie that you only can feel when you are with those with whom you grew up, and we did grow up together, professionally speaking. We shared our stories about the subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination we faced each day as women in a so-called "man's world"; Haigi Bedrosian lamented to us how she was denied membership in the Pawtucket Bar Association because she was a woman. We gave each other strength, and each of us went on to achieve professional success. Haigi Bedrosian became the first woman to serve as Chief Judge of the Family Court, before recently retiring. Alice Gibney is the highly regarded Presiding Justice of the Superior Court. Pamela Macktaz has retired as an Associate Justice on the Family Court after a distinguished career. Doris Licht is a nationally recognized trust and estate lawyer practicing at Hinkley Allen.

Today, it is because of these women and fellow activists of the second wave of feminism that so much has changed. At Roger Williams University School of Law, our state's only law school, 55% of the most recent 1L class were women. Approximately half of all attorneys admitted to the Rhode Island bar last year were women, including my own daughter. And now, a woman of our generation is running for president as the nominee of a major party. It is no wonder that this occasion has triggered my retrospective journey.

Years ago, Clare Boothe Luce said, "Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, 'She doesn't have what it takes.' They will say, 'Women don't have what it takes.'" Ms. Luce wouldn't have said that today, and, for that, I am proud and grateful.

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