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April 9, 2019

Law School News

Celebrating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island

RWU Law event commemorates the first sixty years (1920-1979) of women admitted to the bar in Rhode Island.



A plaque commemorating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island will be dedicated on Thursday at RWU Law.

April 9, 2019
Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I., April 9, 2019 – Roger Williams University School of Law will host a special event commemorating the [First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island](#), featuring the dedication of a plaque listing the names of these 176 pioneers in the law.

The program, sponsored by Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C., will be held Thursday, April 11, 2019, at 4 to 6 pm on the 2nd Floor Atrium at RWU Law, and will include a cocktail reception and speaking program followed by the plaque dedication. Speakers will include third-year RWU Law student Christine Awe, president of the school's Women's Law Society; Professor Emily

Sack; Rhode Island Superior Court Judge Netti Vogel; and Nicole Verdi '14, president of the RWU Law Alumni Association.

The plaque includes the names of the 176 known First Women, “and others unknown,” along with the preamble: “Roger Williams University School of Law honors the pioneering First Women of the Rhode Island Bar (1920 to 1979). Their efforts helped establish the rightful place of women in the legal profession and a foundation upon which a more fully inclusive legal profession can be built.”

The genesis of the event occurred in 2017 at RWU Law’s annual Women in Robes event, which brings together RWU Law students and members of the Rhode Island judiciary.

“Judge Vogel spoke to our students about how slowly women became integrated into the Rhode Island bar,” said Dean Michael J. Yelnosky said, “For example, the first woman was admitted in 1920, but it was not until 50 years later that the total number of women admitted to practice in Rhode Island reached 30. She also mentioned that almost 20 years had passed since then-Dean Harvey Rishikof convened a meeting of some of the first women of the Rhode Island bar to celebrate their accomplishments.”

In response, the staff at the RWU Law Library, headed by Nicole Dyszlewski, began the task of compiling a definitive list of the first women. Dyszlewski soon discovered, to her surprise, that “no one in Rhode Island had been tracking members of the bar by gender in any holistic way.” Accordingly, “that made researching the history of women lawyers in our state a rocky and uncertain road,” she said.

Just over a year after the research began, a First Women Steering Committee was convened, co-chaired by RWU Law Board members Connie Howes, Esq., and the Honorable Patricia Sullivan, who worked to explore how these women might best be remembered and honored. The dedication ceremony on April 11 is the product of their work.

“We owe these women a debt of gratitude,” Yelnosky said, adding that the school hopes to create other opportunities to celebrate the First Women. “That’s one of the roles of a law school — to be a convener. And I can tell you that the positive energy that I’ve felt when a group of these women have gathered to talk about the project is powerful.”

Some findings of the research that led to the creation of the list include:

- The first female member of the Rhode Island bar, Ada Sawyer, passed the bar exam in 1920. Her admittance to practice required a letter from Rhode Island Supreme Court Associate Justice (later Chief Judge) William H. Sweetland, stating that women were legally permitted to do so.
- During the 40 years from Ada Sawyer’s admission in 1920 to 1959, only 18 additional female lawyers were admitted to the Rhode Island bar (five in the 1920s, one in the 1930s, two in the 1940s, and nine in the 1950s).
- Dorothy R. Crockett Bartleson, admitted in 1932, was the first African-American woman to join the Rhode Island bar.

- The number of women admitted to the state bar rose modestly in the 1960s (two in 1960, two each in the years 1965-1967, one in 1968, and one in 1969).
- The 176 First Women include at least 23 judges of various courts, including housing court, probate court, family court, district court, superior court, as well as the first three female justices of the Rhode Island Supreme Court (including one – Justice Maureen E. McKenna Goldberg, admitted in 1978 – who still sits today).
- The Honorable Florence Murray, admitted in 1946, was the first female judge in Rhode Island, the first female member of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, and the first chief judge (now called presiding judge) of the state superior court.
- The Honorable Corinne Grande, admitted in 1953, was the first woman lawyer appointed to the Rhode Island attorney general’s office. From 1960-1967 she was a special assistant attorney general and chief of the office's appellate division. She later became the first woman to be named a District Court judge in Rhode Island.
- The Honorable Haiganush R. Bedrosian, admitted in 1971, was the first women to serve on and lead the state’s family court.
- Arlene Violet, admitted in 1974, was the first woman to be elected Attorney General in any state in the United States.
- The Honorable O. Rogeriee Thompson, admitted in 1976, was the second woman (and first African-American) to be confirmed as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. She was the first African-American woman appointed to the Rhode Island District Court and the first appointed to the Rhode Island Superior Court as well.

Nicole Benjamin '06, a shareholder with Adler Pollock & Sheehan, noted that the firm was proud to sponsor this “important event honoring Rhode Island’s first female attorneys.”

“We are equally proud,” Benjamin added, “to count some of those women as our own here at AP&S – Victoria Almeida, Susan DeBlasio, and Sally Dowling, who spent the last 40 years with AP&S – and so many others as our clients, mentors and dear friends. I consider myself fortunate to be the beneficiary of the perseverance of those early pioneers in our profession. They broke glass ceilings in courthouses, law firms and boardrooms, paving the way for generations of female lawyers in this state. Today, thanks to their leadership, mentorship and friendship, thousands of women stand on their shoulders. I am proud to be one of them.”

Media, First Women and their families, and the public are welcome to attend the event; however [registration is required](#). Any questions should be directed to the Office of Special Events at RWU Law (events@rwu.edu or 401-254-3166). Please specify any special assistance that may be required to attend.