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Celebrating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island

Michael M. Bowden
Roger Williams University School of Law

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Celebrating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island*

Transcript prepared by Michael M. Bowden**

Professor Emily J. Sack

I'd like to welcome all of you here as we celebrate the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island and honor them with the dedication of the First Women plaque that hangs prominently in the law school atrium. The plaque will be a permanent recognition, not only of the achievements of these remarkable women, but of the contributions that these First Women have made and continue to make for the generations of women lawyers that follow them.

There are 176 women listed on this plaque who were admitted to the Rhode Island Bar between 1920—which was the first year that women were allowed to sit for the bar in Rhode Island—and 1979. As you'll see on the plaque, it also says “and others unknown,” because we believe that there are some women we couldn’t identify, who are lost to history, but who took and passed the bar. Each one of these women has a story and their challenges and their accomplishments are truly inspiring. And of course many of these women are well-known in our state for their achievements.

I hope that you will take the time to look at the PowerPoint in the Atrium and the photo display that tells just a few of these stories. Many of these First Women are here today, as well as the family members of those First Women who have passed away. I

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** Director of Law School Communications, Roger Williams University School of Law.
would ask that all the *First Women* and the family members of *First Women* please stand and be recognized.

This event and dedication have been in the planning stages for more than a year and a half, and grew out of the talk that one of our speakers—*First Woman* Justice Vogel—gave at a “Women in Robes” event, the annual dinner of the Women’s Law Society. There are lots of different constituencies, both within the legal community and the law school, that have worked together to make this a reality, and there are many people to thank. All of them are listed in the program and I really urge you to read all of their names.

However, there are some folks that I really need to thank here. First, I’d like to thank Michael Yelnosky, our Dean, who took this idea and pushed forward with it and made it a reality. So, thank you. Nicole Dyszlewski, who is our Law Librarian supreme, head of reference—she’s somewhere in the audience—who did an unbelievable job investigating and researching to find and accurately represent the *First Women*. Vice President Lisa Raiola and her institutional advancement team at the university and our own Chelsie Horne, here at the law school. And, Adler Pollock & Sheehan PC, which has tremendously sponsored this event. It really would not have been possible without the *First Women* Steering Committee, which was organized by Dean Yelnosky and chaired by Judge Patricia Sullivan and Connie Howes, both *First Women*, and also both members of the law school’s Board of Directors. I’d ask the members of the Steering Committee to please stand and be recognized.

When we were first working on the Steering Committee, I remember Dean Yelnosky saying to me that it was remarkable how easy it had been to get these very busy women to commit to serve on the Committee. And it’s true. It’s been obvious from that, and from the number of people here today that this event, that this issue has resonated with many, many people. It is truly a powerful moment for our legal community, for our law school, and—most especially—for our students, as we focus on the continuing need to achieve gender equity in our profession. And I’m grateful that all of you are here today. So, thank you.

And now, I’d like to introduce our wonderful speakers. The first speaker, whom it gives me great pleasure to introduce, is Christine Awe. Christine is a graduating third-year law student and is current president of the Women’s Law Society. She has been
a member of the Society since her 1L year, serving first as 1L representative and then as vice president in her second year. Christine has a longstanding commitment to women’s issues. Before law school, she founded an organization to mentor adolescent girls who have been victims of sexual abuse. She has told me that throughout her law school career, she has been able to secure internships and opportunities through relationships with women attorneys. One of those was a summer internship with the Rhode Island Supreme Court after her 1L year, which she was able to get through the mentorship of First Woman Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg. Christine is currently completing an externship at the FCC in Washington and has flown in just to be with us today. Thank you, Christine.

Christine Y. Awe ’19, President of RWU Law’s Women’s Law Society

As some of you may know, I’m a little nervous. Good afternoon to my fellow colleagues, Roger Williams University family, our honorees and members of the community. As I stand before you today, with only thirty-six days left until graduation, it is truly an honor to be in a room full of trailblazers. Trailblazers who have laid the path that has afforded me the opportunity to stand before you as an African American female law student, and soon-to-be attorney. I love that. I am truly grateful.

Over the past few months, I have reflected on my journey to get to this moment and journey through life. During my months of reflection, I often think of every woman who has helped me, every woman who has paved the way for me to stand here, and every woman whom I have looked to for encouragement, whether I’ve known them personally or not. These women consist of each of the First Women being honored here today. Women like Ada L. Sawyer, Dorothy Crockett Bartleson and Arlene Violet. Or women like Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg, Judge Netti Vogel, Beverly Ledbetter, and Justice Rogeriee Thompson. In fact, it is important that women law students are able to stand on their shoulders and to have these women as role models. I would personally like to thank you all. I thank you on behalf of Women’s Law Society, and also on behalf of all the students of Roger Williams University School of Law.
There’s a popular quote by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich that says, “Well-behaved women seldom make history.” So, we thank you all for misbehaving! We thank you all for misbehaving by making the decision to pursue a career in a field that historically was only recognized for men. At a time when a woman’s role was to be a homemaker and assistant, you decided to join and take on a role that would impact the lives of women, men, children and families. And even though, decades later, women are still seen as a minority in the field of law, you have personally given me and every single female law student the courage to continue on despite the statistics.

Women, now more than ever, are being recognized for their contributions and accomplishments—and this is just the beginning. So, on behalf of the women who went before me, the ones who stand beside me, and the ones who are coming after me, we thank you for being the first. We all know that challenges persist but we will not stop moving on. We will keep pressing on in this race, on this journey. The marathon continues. Thank you all.

Professor Emily J. Sack

Our next speaker is Nicole Verdi. Nicole graduated magna cum laude in 2014 from Roger Williams University School of Law and is currently a litigation associate at Adler Pollock & Sheehan PC. Nicole is also president of our Law Alumni Association. She is very active in the Rhode Island community, serving as co-chair of the Board of Youth in Action, a commissioner of the Providence City Planning Commission, and a mentor for many young women in Providence. Nicole also participated in the Women’s Policy Institute of the Women’s Fund of Rhode Island, and, as a fellow at that Institute, she researched and advocated for women’s rights legislation in the State as well as in the cities of Providence and Central Falls. And, right after law school, she served as a law clerk for First Woman Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg. She was also one of my favorite students.

Nicole M. Verdi ’14, President, Law Alumni Association

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is my pleasure to speak with you today, to celebrate and honor Rhode Island’s First Women. I believe most of you know that, a few years ago, Dean
Yelno sky, faculty and staff at Roger Williams University School of Law, along with a few members of the Rhode Island judiciary and bar, endeavored to finish a job that was started over a decade ago, and put together a list of the first female attorneys in the state.

Nicole Dyszlewski, a lawyer and librarian at the law school, did the lion’s share of the work. She and her colleagues not only helped create the list, but also researched the lives of many of these First Women, so that we could learn as much as possible in order to acknowledge their contributions. What should have been a straightforward task turned out to be fairly onerous and time-consuming. The list could not simply be found online. Nicole and her colleagues had to pore through archives, news articles, bar journals, judicial record centers and the official rolls held at the Rhode Island Supreme Court, which lists the signatures of all the attorneys admitted to the Rhode Island Bar. Of course, it did not list which attorneys were male or female, so the team had to dig deeper. Eventually, a preliminary list was published in the Rhode Island Bar Journal, and, with input from women throughout the state, we now have one master list, which we presented to you this evening. It should be clear by now that it took the entire Rhode Island legal community to come together to honor and celebrate Rhode Island’s First Women.

I’d like to take the opportunity to tell you a little bit more about them. There are approximately 176 First Women, who were the first females admitted into the Bar between 1920 and 1979. Becoming an attorney during this time was certainly a feat in and of itself. But these women did not stop there. Three of Rhode Island’s First Women were sworn in as the first female Rhode Island Supreme Court justices. Another was elected to office as Rhode Island’s first female attorney general. She is now a proud member of Roger Williams University’s Board of Trustees. Some of these First Women were sworn in as Rhode Island Superior Court judges. One of these women was a guiding voice in creating the state’s Family Court system. And others were sworn in as Rhode Island Family Court judges. In total, at least 23 First Women became judges.

Rhode Island’s First Women went on to serve in positions in all three branches of Rhode Island government. Some First Women went on to be elected as Rhode Island state senators and representatives. Others have led the Rhode Island Bar Association
as president. And one of these women led the first bar initiative in the country that established free legal services to honored service members.

Some of these women were the first females that Rhode Island law firms had ever hired. Others went on to become the first female partners in their law firms. And several continued on to leadership positions on their firm’s executive committees. One First Woman was the first female to ever try a case before a jury. And another First Woman prevailed in a landmark case that helped set the national legal standard for gender equality in school athletic programs.

These are just some of the many legal accomplishments that Rhode Island’s First Women achieved. But not all of Rhode Island’s First Women went on to practice law. Some of these First Women became industry leaders in education, banking and health care. Others dedicated their lives to social justice, equality, diversity, equity, and inclusion. One woman was instrumental in the movement that eventually created Save the Bay, a non-profit organization working to protect the environment. At least one First Woman was a community organizer and another attended the March on Washington.

The effect and impact of Rhode Island’s First Women is massive. When writing this speech, I initially felt that there was no possible way I could adequately articulate how monumental these women were and are. These women epitomize the phrase, “glass-ceiling breakers.” These women have broken so many barriers, and they did it at a time when breaking barriers was not only frowned upon but was also ridiculed and criticized. Many of these women broke these barriers while raising families, running households, combating health problems and helping to promote other females in the legal profession. If not for these women, I would not be standing here today. If not for Rhode Island’s First Women, the paths of my fellow female law school classmates and female legal colleagues would be and could have been very different. The impact of Rhode Island’s First Women spreads wider than the legal profession. If not for these women, it would likely have not been possible for Rhode Island to have elected its first female governor.

It is important that we specifically recognize and honor Rhode Island’s first woman of color, Dorothy Crockett, who was Rhode
Island’s first female African American attorney, admitted to the bar in 1932. Not only have our sisters of color triumphed over the obstructions imposed on them by sexism, they have kicked open the doors shut on them because of the color of their skin.

While reflecting on my privilege, I think back to a piece of wisdom that a First Woman—and one of my mentors, Rhode Island’s only present female Supreme Court Justice, Maureen McKenna Goldberg—shared with me. She said that Rhode Island’s first female Supreme Court Justice, Florence Murray, broke down so many barriers, and that after she broke down those barriers and boldly marched through, she turned around and invited other females to follow. She told me that, when we all walk through a door, we must turn around and assist and welcome other females through that door with us. While researching and working on this speech, it became clear to me that so many First Women lived their lives and live their lives in accordance with this mantra. It has become a goal of mine to do the same, and I hope that it is something that the next generation of female lawyers continues to do as well. It’s on us, as women in the legal profession, to ensure that we use our status to extend that same invitation to the next generation of female firsts, a generation that promises to be more diverse and will shatter the most stubborn ceilings and kick open the most stubborn doors that remain.

I want to end by saying that I am truly inspired by Rhode Island’s First Women and am incredibly grateful for them. Because of these women, the future of Rhode Island and its legal profession is incredibly bright. I want to thank these First Women, and I hope you will all join me in a warm round of applause for the First Women tonight.

Professor Emily J. Sack

Thank you, Nicole. Our next speaker really needs no introduction, but let me try. Since 1994, the Honorable Netti Vogel has served as an Associate Justice on Rhode Island’s Superior Court, where she handles a wide array of civil and criminal matters.

Justice Vogel is a First Woman, having been admitted to the Rhode Island Bar in 1975. Prior to taking the bench, Justice Vogel practiced law for nineteen years as a civil litigator, and, during her legal career, she has helped break barriers for women in the legal profession. From the mid- to late-1970s, she was the first and, at
that time, only woman to handle back-to-back jury trials in the private sector. In 1980, she became the first woman to try a case before a jury while visibly pregnant. Later she founded a successful civil litigation firm which was the first female-headed law office in the state to represent insurance carriers. And in 2009, Justice Vogel was honored by the Rhode Island Bar Association for her contributions toward advancing women in the law.

Justice Vogel serves on RWU Law’s Board of Directors, and she regularly mentors many of our students. She is a longtime supporter of the Women’s Law Society’s “Women in Robes” event each fall, and she works tirelessly to promote and help the school and our students. And, as we’ve said, she’s one of the driving forces behind this event. So, thank you Justice Vogel.

**The Honorable Netti C. Vogel, Rhode Island Superior Court**

Emily, thank you so much for those kind words. And I say to these two young women, I should have gone first! I can’t follow what they said. I want to thank you for honoring me, my contemporaries, and those who came before us. I have a great deal of gratitude toward those who made this incredible event possible—the law school, Dean Yelnosky, Nicole Dyszlewski (I pronounced it okay now), the Women’s Law Society, the Alumni Association, Judge Sullivan and Connie Howes, and the committee that I’ve been honored to serve on. Also Lisa Raiola and Chelsie Horne, and everybody else I forgot.

It was so good to see so many of my old friends here. So many I haven’t seen, some in decades. I’ll tell you what it reminded me of. If you saw the movie, “A League of Their Own”—the very last scene, you know where… that’s what it reminded me of. And this is kind of our Hall of Fame, so that’s awesome. I appreciate the opportunity this afternoon, early this evening, to talk at this event. It is such an important event, why we look back and recognize those who came before us. And it’s important to know how doing so enriches us.

Most of us are well-acquainted with the compelling story of Ada Sawyer, the first woman lawyer in the state of Rhode Island. Of course, she was only a lawyer after the Supreme Court ruled that a woman is a person within the meaning of the court rule. Ada was a marvelous woman. She began her legal career as a secretary in a
probate firm. By the end of her career, she was the head of that firm and a highly respected lawyer in the community. When I began practicing law in 1975, I saw her every day because—that makes me sound kind of old, you would think!—but our offices were in the same building. She was at the tail end of her illustrious career. She would arrive in a chauffeur-driven sedan, wrapped in a mink coat. That is when she wasn’t going off on the luxury liner, the QE2, to Europe!

As somebody starting out in my career, I had a cloth coat. Remember Doris, it was from Loehmann’s? And I didn’t have a chauffeur. Years later now, I’m still wearing a cloth coat and, even though I probably shouldn’t be, I’m still driving myself everywhere! But, it is wonderful. She was very cool and well-deserving of all the honors that have been bestowed on her. But there are others that came after Ada Sawyer—but before the second wave of feminism in the ’70s—who never have been recognized for their contribution to women in the law before this evening. How lovely that they are remembered here today.

When planning of this event was in its infancy, I met with Nicole Dyszlewski. She had done so much research, and I wanted to go over it with her and add to her information from my own experiences. I was just amazed that there were women on her list that I’d never heard of. Some of them may have abandoned their journey to join the legal profession before they reached any level of success. I cannot say that they hit a glass ceiling because they never entered the room. They weren’t invited. Certainly any effort on the part of these women to compete equally with their brother lawyers would have been met with virtually insurmountable opposition by the bench, the bar, and society. We only have to look at the early career of one of our heroes, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to understand what these women went through.

When RBG entered Harvard Law School in 1956, the Dean confronted her and accused her of taking the place of a man. Ginsburg later transferred to the prestigious Columbia University School of Law and graduated at the top of her class. Yet no law firm would hire her. No judge would take her as a clerk. Some of the honorees tonight are women of her generation—who perhaps never sat at counsel table in a courtroom, whose names never appeared on letterheads of successful law firms. Some who never practiced law at all. Yet, we owe them a debt of gratitude, just as we owe one
to Ada Sawyer, to Florence Murray, Corinne Grande, and the better-known pioneers. Their very audacity to seek to stand next to men, toe-to-toe, and become part of a profession that historically excluded them, helped to blaze the trail for others to follow. For my generation and my contemporaries to follow. And for yours.

These women shouldn't be forgotten. When we honor the women of yesterday, we recognize that we're part of something that began decades ago. Our identity as women law students, lawyers, and judges gives us an identity based on a rich past. To an extent, we are one. We owe a debt of gratitude to our earlier sisters at the bar. By recognizing them, we acknowledge and celebrate the progression that is possible through perseverance, even against all odds.

I know what it was like to attend law school in the early ‘70s and to enter the profession in the mid-70s. My contemporaries and I stood on the shoulders of women who came before us. The giants who have awards and buildings named after them, and the lesser-known women who are honored here tonight. I'm grateful to participate in a program honoring them as well as their better-known sisters.

So why is it relevant to women law students and young lawyers to look back, instead of focusing solely on the present and the near future? Pretty regularly, my contemporaries and I have been asked to share some of our experiences, entering the profession when it was male dominated. The stories are interesting. They're entertaining. But, that isn't reason enough to acknowledge and celebrate those who came before you. There has to be more and there is more.

Aside from providing a vehicle for expressing a debt of gratitude to those who blazed a trail for you to follow, remembering the women lawyers of the past enriches you as well as it honors them or, in some instances, their memories. As you well know, women entering the profession today are not free from some level of discrimination themselves; yourselves. It is true that women have made incredible strides toward equality in the courtroom. There are as many women on the Superior Court as men. It isn't the least bit uncommon for me to preside over a very significant trial where both sides are represented by women. At least when it’s a criminal trial and the lawyers come from the public sector, public
defender’s office, and attorney general’s office. You may well see women on both sides.

But not all lawyers are litigators. And few litigators, particularly in the private sector, spend the majority of their time in court. I’ve had interesting conversations with newer members of the bar. Modern-day discrimination may be more subtle than that faced by my contemporaries, and by those who came before us. But it’s discrimination all the same. Traditional sexual stereotypes and gender discrimination haven’t disappeared from the legal profession. In fact, reports show that, although half of the current law school graduates are women, we continue to make up just about 35 percent of lawyers at law firms. And women lawyers at those firms enjoy far smaller percentages of equity partnerships than men. Partners are often more comfortable socializing with male associates. They invite them more often to partake in social engagements with clients. There remains a gender-based wage gap. Female lawyers are less paid compared to their male counterparts. And women lawyers still experience sexual harassment, sometimes committed by the very lawyers who are counseling their clients against workplace harassment.

And then there remains a work-life balance. It can be quite difficult to focus solely on your profession—working long hours, seven days a week—when you’re a single parent. Or even when you come from a two-parent household. Women suffer guilt and are more torn than men when parenting takes a back seat to the job. Society has taught us that women are the primary parents. And as much as fathers co-parent and even co-parent equally with mothers, society has not caught up with that notion.

When I entered the profession, some of the newer lawyers were a lot older than most of the women law students here today. Many didn’t feel able to pursue their career dream until after they had raised their families. And there were others who struggled. Incredibly, Joan Montalbano, who I knew quite well, had seven children. And she commuted to Boston. We didn’t have a Rhode Island law school. She commuted to Boston four nights a week and her seven children, when she started law school—one was maybe a toddler about four years old, and they went up to maybe fourteen or so. And she made that happen. That’s the perseverance that we had. But there were a lot of law students who didn’t go straight
through college. They started their families or raised their families before they felt able to do so, or were permitted to do so.

You know, understanding the struggles of past generations of women lawyers helps us understand and appreciate how women lawyers achieved the success they enjoy today. As the past has impacted the present, so will the present impact the future. The importance of recognizing the so-called pioneers of the women’s bar goes beyond gender discrimination. It is also important because newer lawyers and those about to enter the profession still are breaking down barriers: Lawyers of color. Gender non-conforming lawyers. Lawyers with disabilities. Lawyers whose first language is not English. Those whose career paths have been filled with obstacles, including financial—some are trailblazers in their own families. The women who were the legal pioneers of yesterday can be the teachers and mentors of the legal pioneers of today.

By recognizing that past generations of women deserve to be honored in the legal profession, we move forward with renewed resolve. As I stood on the shoulders of the earlier generation of women lawyers, you’re standing on the shoulders of my generation. And future lawyers will stand on your shoulders.

Appreciating that progression makes us recognize the vital need to remain active and vocal, and gives us the optimism to know we’re making a difference. I urge you to participate in programs that may be established by the law school as a spin-off of events such as this. I am so proud to be among those early women lawyers you are honoring tonight. You know, when Nicole Verdi was speaking, I was like, “Whoa, I’m one of those people, that’s awesome.” And of course, I love seeing my name on a plaque if it’s spelled correctly—and it is!

So I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, women and gentlemen, thank you so much for honoring me, for honoring my contemporaries, and for honoring those who came before me. Thank you.

Professor Emily J. Sack

Thank you so much, Justice Vogel. To follow up on something that Justice Vogel said, I wanted to say that this is our first event but we do not plan for it to be our last. And our plan is to work to develop future activities that will focus on issues of gender equity
and honor and promote women in the legal profession. You’ll see on the back of your programs that there is an email address, firstwomenlaw@rwu.edu. If you have ideas or would like to volunteer to work on these plans, please email us at that address. And now, please adjourn to the atrium where in about fifteen minutes or so, we will be unveiling the plaque. But first I’d like all the First Women to please come up here so we can take a nice photo of you.