Dean Logan's Blog: Women-in-Law Day Focuses on Path-breaking Lawyers

Roger Williams University School of Law

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This year we were honored to host Professor Paula Monopoli, a tenured member of the faculty at the University of Maryland School of Law and Founding Director of the Women, Leadership & Equality Program. Professor Monopoli had a busy day: lunch with student leaders, coffee with faculty, and dinner with members of the Rhode Island Women’s Bar Association. Oh, and she also delivered an excellent keynote address “From Ada to Arlene and Beyond: Why Women Lawyers Matter.”

The focus of the talk was the history of women in the legal profession, highlighting some of the women who challenged the view that women were not entitled to have full rights of citizenship, including the right to practice law. She discussed the 1873 decision of the Supreme Court of the United States denying Myra Bradwell’s challenge to the gender ban in Illinois, which featured the following antediluvian language from Justice Bradley:
"The civil law, as well as nature herself, has always recognized a wide difference in the respective spheres and destinies of man and woman. Man is, or should be, woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfit it for many of the occupations of civil life . . . . The harmony, not to say identity, of interest and views which belong, or should belong, to the family institution is repugnant to the idea of a woman adopting a distinct and independent career from that of her husband."

As of course we all know, things started to change with the passage of the 19th amendment in the early years of the 20th century, and Professor Monopoli hailed the courage of the suffragettes (wonderfully recounted in the film “Iron-Jawed Angels”) https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CDIQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.imdb.com%2Ftitle%2Ftt0338139%2F&ei=hks0U9KJJ8qnsQT47lHQBW&usg=AFQjCNHcN75vB56LxQQ3q8m8Zng3F-SNQ&bvm=bv.63738703,d.cWc. She also commended Ruth Bader Ginsberg, a pioneering law professor who successfully advocated for women’s rights in the courts (before she became JUSTICE Ginsberg) and Arlene Violet, who was the first female Attorney General in the country (and Rhode Island’s first woman to win state-wide office), who was in the audience.

Wrapping up, Professor Monopoli encouraged female law students to approach their studies with “persistence and grit,” so that they could continue the progress that their predecessors have made in bringing gender equality to the legal profession.