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# PROFESSOR GIRTH'S STUDENTS ARE IN HER DEBT

In the early 1970s, Marjorie L. Girth became the first tenured female faculty member to teach in UB Law School. This September, she became another UB Law School "first" — the first female associate dean. "I'm really looking forward to it," she says of this latest challenge.

Prof. Girth returned from her year-long sabbatical in September and resumed teaching bankruptcy law to third year students: debtor-creditor relations in the fall followed by bankruptcy reorganization in the spring. "Almost everybody has difficulty with money at some point in their lives. It's an area where you can help people solve problems that are extremely important to them," she says.

Many of her students claim they owe her a debt that can never be paid.

"Here I am, practicing in bankruptcy. I don't think I would have pursued this area of the law if I hadn't had the opportunity to be her student," says Peggy Lillis-Snajczuk, a law clerk to Judge Beryl E. McGuire, the U.S. Bankruptcy Judge for the Western District of New York.

"She had an enormous influence on my life," says Mrs. Snajczuk, who plans to pursue her legal career in private practice specializing in bankruptcy once she is finished at the court.

"She took what many people consider to be a tedious subject and sparked my interest. Isn't that the sign of a good teacher?"

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A 1959 graduate of Mount Holyoke Col-

lege with a bachelor's degree in international relations, Prof. Girth originally went to law school intending to pursue a diplomatic career.

"At Harvard Law, I was one of 12 women in a class of 550," she recalls. "Harvard only began admitting women in 1950 and some members of the faculty were still very resentful. They considered it wasted space and treated us in a very skeptical way. But the male students were not threatened by our presence, probably because they knew we wouldn't be seriously considered for any job they wanted."

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After her second year in law school, "I had a very difficult time obtaining interviews for even non-paying summer jobs — so you can imagine what my opportunities for salaried jobs were like!"

She ultimately obtained a summer position at a small, commercially-oriented law firm in her home town of Trenton, New Jersey. It was there that she realized how much she enjoyed bankruptcy work and the related areas of consumer and commercial credit problems. After graduating from

Harvard Law School, she spent three years practicing with that Trenton firm, where "everything was always an emergency, very very busy and slam-bang."

Next came a far more quiet, five-year stint as a research associate for The Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. Brookings is a private foundation which was then engaged in a nationwide study of the operation of bankruptcy courts.

"I especially liked doing the field research. Working at Brookings gave me a chance to think about things, and I decided that I needed more personal interaction than full time research was going to provide."

In the early 1970s, some law schools started to appoint females to full time faculty positions. Prof. Girth heard there was an opening in the area of commercial law at UB Law School and began to consider the possibility of full time law teaching, a field she had previously believed was unavailable to women.

After she was hired in 1971, she immediately set out to recruit other female teachers. "I didn't think it was healthy in terms of role models to be the only woman," she says. After "a great deal of affirmative effort," a second, and then a third female was appointed to the Law School's faculty roster.

"Since all of us have different styles, it gradually took less effort to persuade other women that this was a congenial place where they might fit in, too."

Prof. Girth has also played an important role in setting comparable admissions stan-



dards for both sexes. Her work has paid dividends. Today, she feels that "Here at the Law School, we make a genuine effort not to treat people in a gender-biased way. It's a much more diverse place than it was 15-years ago. That's healthy and a lot more interesting for everyone."

Her activism on behalf of feminist causes on and off campus stems from a fundamental belief in the value of maximizing people's potential and opening up opportunities for women. As an active member of the New York State Women's Bar Association, one of the things she has advocated and

which has recently been enacted is the educational equity act, which attempts to open up opportunities for women in the public schools. "New York State's earlier legislation on educational equity was very weak compared to Title IX," she explains.

During her sabbatical year, she devoted a major portion of her time to leading the Erie County Task Force on the Status of Women. She was appointed by County Executive Edward Rutkowski as chairperson of the 19-member panel, which has spent the past year studying issues of health, employment, education, social services, senior services and housing. The task force plans to issue their report this fall.

Prof. Girth has also assumed a leadership role in the legal community on bankruptcy and related commercial issues at national, state and local levels. For the past three years she has served as chairperson of the Consumer Bankruptcy Committee of the American Bar Association, and she was elected in 1985 to the Council of the Section on Corporation, Banking and Business Law, which represents over 55,000 members. This year she will head the New York State Bar Association's Banking, Corporation and Business Law Section.

She was also appointed by the Chief Judge of the Second Circuit to the Merit Screening Committee for the appointment of bankruptcy judges for the Western District of New York.

Professor Girth has built a reputation as a faculty member with a strong commitment to public and professional service. She commands the respect of her colleagues and students alike, winning the faculty award at the UB Law School Commencement in 1981 and again in 1984.

"People make choices depending on what's important to them," she observes, "and this has been a satisfying combination for me.

"I enjoy teaching very much and I like being on the university faculty, but I think if I did that exclusively I would start to feel uncomfortable about losing touch with the kind of issues that engage the interest of the practicing bar and legislatures." ■