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100 YEARS OF WOMEN AT UB LAW: A BRIEF HISTORY

by LisaBeth Gai

UB Law: A Short History

As the Industrial Revolution began to take hold, law schools began to replace clerking in a law office as the preferred route to becoming an attorney. By 1887 there were over three thousand students enrolled in law schools throughout the United States. At this time Buffalo was a booming metropolitan area in desperate need of legal services. Prior to 1887 there was no law school west of Albany in New York State, so in the Spring of that year a group of local attorneys decided to establish one in Buffalo. The law school was initially established under Niagara University but became independent in 1891.

Women's Introduction to Law School

The Buffalo Law School graduating class of 1899 was distinguished by the presence of two women graduates. Not only were these the first two women graduates of this law school but they were also among the very first women law graduates in the country. The only other woman to have graduated from an American law school prior to this was Alice Rufie Jordan who registered at Yale Law School in 1885. However, Yale was unaware that Ms. Jordan was a woman and when the school discovered it they tried to keep her from graduating. The support of several faculty members resulted in the first woman graduate of an American law school. However, Yale subsequently placed a disclaimer in their catalogue which stated that the instruction at their law school was to be open to "persons of the male sex only." It was not until 1918 that Yale's policy changed and in 1920 Yale Law School had its second female graduate in thirty-five years. Columbia Law School graduated its first woman in 1930 and Harvard Law School did not follow suit until 1954. The history of women at UB Law is a tradition to be celebrated.

Women at UB Law

Enrollment

The two women who graduated from the Buffalo Law School in 1899 were Helen Z. M. Rodgers and Cecil B. Weiner. Both women went on to become well respected attorneys and had long legal careers. Ms. Rodgers was the first woman to argue an appeal before the New York Court of Appeals. Ms. Weiner was the first judge of the Erie County Children's Court (which is now called Erie County Family Court).

With the exception of the World War II years when women's enrollment was as high as forty percent, for more than eighty years the enrollment of women at Buffalo's law school remained low. In response to the significant under-representation of women and minorities in the legal profession, in 1969 UB Law instituted a minority recruitment program. In 1971 a dramatic increase in female enrollment became evident. The incoming class of 1971 included 63 women and by 1975 there were 215 women enrolled at the law school. The presence of women was changing the law school environment.

First Women Faculty

The first African American to join the faculty at UB Law was also a woman; Ms. Barbara M. Sims began teaching here in 1969. She had also been a 1955 graduate of the law school. Ms. Sims and the 1970s ushered in the law school's first tenured female professor. Professor Marjorie L. Girth joined the faculty in 1971 as an Associate Professor, was named a full Professor eight years later and then served as an Associate Dean from 1986.

Women in Clubs and Activities

The BUFFALO LAW REVIEW published its first issue in 1951. That following year Hillary P. Bradford served as the publication's Editor in Chief. Sadly, following Ms. Bradford there were no women to head student publications for over a decade.

The 1970s was a time of great involvement of women in the law school. In the Spring of 1973, a large group of female law students helped the law school realize the need for a clinic formed specially for women. The clinic was designed to assist women

with legal problems such as divorce and assault. The early 1970s also saw the creation of the Association of Women Law Students whose goal it was to promote gender equality in the law school and legal profession. In 1975 the first woman to be elected to the presidency of the Student Bar Association was Rosemary Gerasia Roberts; the SBA had been created more than twenty years earlier. Almost twenty-five years after Ms. Roberts presidency position, women have held virtually every student leadership position the law school has to offer.

Entering the 21st Century

Women's roles in the legal profession are established; this is not to say that there is equality. However, women now hold tenured faculty positions at law schools across the country. There are increasing numbers of women in administrative positions such as Presidents and Deans. Women will undoubtedly continue to succeed and break ground in the law schools and in the legal profession.

The importance of the history of women's involvement in the legal profession over the last 100 years cannot be undermined; it is through this history that all of us, as a profession, can learn, advance, and succeed.