Sisters In Law: Conference Looks Back On A Century Of Achievement

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Front row: Hon. Melanie L. Cyganowski '81, Hon. Ann T. Mikoll '54
Back row, left to right: Hon. Rose D. LaMendola '55, Hon. Barbara Howe '80 and Hon. M. Dolores Denman '65
One hundred years ago, the first two women graduated from what was then Buffalo Law School. They did pretty well for themselves: Helen Z.M. Rodgers became the first woman to argue before the New York Court of Appeals, and Cecil B. Wiener was a judge in the predecessor to Family Court. Both were attorneys for 20 years before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave them the right to vote.

Recently the University at Buffalo Law School honored that landmark graduation anniversary in a daylong conference. Attendees were invited to reflect on the accomplishments and the future of women in the legal profession, and more than 100 students, faculty and members of Buffalo's legal community took part.
The conference, "Sisters in Law: A Century of Achievement at UB," was held on Oct. 22, 1999. The salute included several speakers and presentations, an alumnae panel discussion, a salute to women in the judiciary and several educational seminars.

Though much of the event focused on the history and achievements of UB Law alumnae — the school has graduated 3,016 women to date — attendees were reminded of women's long struggle nationally to become a full part of the profession. The struggle, several speakers declared, is not finished.

"While we have a lot to celebrate, we still have a lot to accomplish," UB Law School Dean R. Nils Olsen Jr. said during opening remarks. "Those of us who study the legal profession pin a great deal of hope on the democratization of the profession and the influence that women within the legal profession will ultimately render in terms of the way we interact and serve the society."

The event's keynote speaker was author Lorraine Dusky, who discussed landmark events in the history of women in law. An award-winning journalist, she wrote the book Still Unequal: The Shameful Truth About Women and Justice in America (Crown).

Dusky listed several "courageous women who brought us here" by pushing to get into what had been a male-dominated profession. In particular, she detailed resistance against women's move into the legal field, even after the first women were admitted to law schools (at Washington University, the University of Iowa and Howard University) in 1869. Yale had at one point denied diplomas to women who completed school there, and the New York Times had editorialized that "married women could serve themselves and humanity better than by becoming lawyers."

"And so it went, state by state by state," Dusky said. "We would win some, we would lose some. And the men would come up with some imagined reason why we shouldn't be allowed to be a member of the Bar. But we were proving that we could do it, and a few good men were listening."

One pioneering woman attorney, Dusky said, had a male adversary "who once suggested she would be better off at home raising children. She coolly shot back: 'I had rather be in almost any business than raise a man such as you.' You have to love these women. Their hardships were great, the discrimination seemingly insurmountable, but their legacy is the doors they opened for us."

And, she said, "Consider how far we have come. Forty-five percent of all law students are women, and it is 50 percent here. Twenty-six percent of the lawyers in the country are women. Fourteen percent of the partners in law firms are women. Fourteen of the states' highest courts and that of the District of Columbia are headed by women. There are two women on the U.S. Supreme Court, and Janet Reno is still the attorney general."

Dusky offered advice to today's female law students and graduates: "Mentor each other. Mentor new associates. Don't let them fall between the cracks. If you are a teacher, man or woman, your job is clear: Be a strong advocate for women students. Support each other."

During a panel discussion, six UB Law graduates of different ages discussed their school, professional and personal experiences across the decades. The speakers were Lillian Cowan '27, Hon. Mary Ann Killeen '52, Hon. Betsy Hurley '61, Hon. Rose H. Scione '61, Barbara Kavanaugh '83 and Tonya Guzman '99. Together, they painted a picture of a profession that gradually — painfully — opened its doors to women.

Cowan, who still practices law, recounted her friendship with pioneers Rodgers and Wiener, who both mentored female law students while Cowan was enrolled at UB Law.

"It was my privilege to know these women and admire them," said Cowan, one of six women in a graduating class of 100. Beginning her practice when the Great Depression hit in 1929, she found work in the Social Security Department. She continued practicing law while raising a family.

"After I got married, I wanted to be with my children and do law work. I kind of fitted law into my life. I worked at home, and grad-
Clockwise from top left:
Hon. Melanie L. Cyganowski ’81
Hon. Ann T. Mikoll ’54
Hon. Mary Ann Killeen ’52
Hon. Betsy C. Harley ’64
Sara Horowitz ’89
Hon. Rose H. Scoiters ’73
Lorraine Dusky

Center:
Rosemarie E. Farrell ’91 and
Libilita E. Cowan ’77
“Sure, we fought discrimination from time to time. That is in the air and it will always be in the air. We will probably be fighting that all our days, your days and mine. But I always figured that if you have a case, if you do your very best for your client, you are really on a little higher plane, because they will be telling their friends, ‘Oh, what a good job she did, and she was a woman.’”

“It wasn’t easy,” said Killeen, who went from a large law firm to election to Buffalo City Court, on the second attempt. “You get a little cynical when you are told by a partner in your law firm, quote, ‘Over my dead body will there be a woman partner in this office.’”

Hurley said she and the other four women in her entering class of 79 law students faced suspicions that they were in school strictly to land a husband. But she found support in a women lawyers’ group that acted as mentors to the women students, and moved from a large firm to a solo practice in Lockport — operating part time out of her home, where she said, “when the phone rang, that was a signal to my young daughter to start getting into things.”

“I think I have been treated with respect by my fellow attorneys,” Hurley said. “But I have always had the philosophy that you can get more with sugar than you can with vinegar. If you go into something with your hackles up, you are going to produce the worst in the person you are dealing with. If you kind of sneak around and be nice to them, they do not know what you are doing, and you get a lot done that way.”

Sconiers spoke of several situations in which she struggled to be taken seriously. “Being taken seriously was a challenge I faced. Being an African-American woman was a double challenge,” she said.

She told of having a hard time finding a study group that would accept her in law school, and of being mistaken by a judge for a client. But success, she said, is sweet: “It is hard not to take you seriously when you are sitting behind that bench with that black robe on.”

Kavanaugh said law school was “a tremendous experience for me. It was my first experience of women as a community. My three years in law school shaped me and changed me to such a degree that the suburban displaced homemaker who first moved to Buffalo left law school with a commitment to a career in public service that has never changed.

“I remember law school,” she said, “as a period of intellectual and self-discovery, including the discovery of a women’s community that led me to use my career in the different ways that I have — in legal services, and certainly in politics, to represent and be sensitive to communities that traditionally have been excluded.”

Recent graduate Guzman spoke of some salutary trends: more diversity among attorneys, good job prospects for recent graduates, and “an increase in women who are passionate about making a difference, getting things done and being successful.”

“As women, we have come a long way and made a lot of progress,” she said. “There is room for all of us, and we should continue to support and uplift one another.”

A luncheon honored UB Law’s 27 women graduates who are currently serving in judicial posts throughout the country. Receiving special citations were four justices of the New York State Supreme Court: Hon. M. Dolores Denman ‘65, Hon. Jacqueline M. Koshiian ‘59, Hon. Rose D. Lamendola ’55 and Hon. Ann T. Mikoll ’54.

The luncheon program’s speaker was the Hon. Melanie D. Cyganowski ’81, a U.S. bankruptcy judge in the Eastern District of New York, in Hauppauge. She discussed the history of UB Law, particularly of the women students here, and of women in the judiciary.

“In 1897, when Wiener and Rodgers entered law school, society didn’t hold women professionals in esteem,” Cyganowski said, noting that an 1897 census showed only 182 female law students in the entire United States. She discussed the pressures placed on politicians and schools to bring women into law school and the judiciary, through Sandra Day O’Connor’s placement as the United States’ first female Supreme Court justice in 1981.

The conference included four substantive classroom sessions, on the topics “Balancing Work and Family,” “Workplace Rights,” “Women and Their Money” and “Access to Health Care.”

A congratulatory letter from first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton highlighted the conference. Noting that she spoke at the 150th anniversary of the Women’s Rights Convention in nearby Seneca Falls, Clinton, herself an attorney, tied women’s struggles for workplace equality to family issues. “If women flourish,” she wrote, “their families flourish.”

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Clockwise from top left:
Vice Dean Dianne Avery '82, left, and Hon. Denise E. O'Donnell '82
Tonya E. Guzman '99
Asst. Dean Ilene R. Fleischmann, left, and Prof. Winnie F. Taylor '75
Hon. Barbara Howe '80, left, and Hon. M. Dolores Denman '63
Left to right: Irene Chiu '00, Min Min Chan '98 and Gayle L. V. Eagan '83
Professor Marjorie Girth, left, and Lorraine Dusky

Center:
Cecil B. Wiener, left, and Helen Z. M. Rodgers, both Class of 1899
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

FIRST WOMEN UB LAW GRADUATES
Helen Z. M. Rodgers Class of 1899
Cecil B. Wiener Class of 1899

FIRST WOMEN ON THE BUFFALO LAW REVIEW
Mary Davey Class of 1952
Phyllis J. Hubbard Class of 1952
Alfreda Wilczek Class of 1952
Janet C. McFarland Class of 1953
Members of the Law Review for Volume 1, 1951/52

FIRST WOMAN ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE BUFFALO LAW REVIEW
Dawn Girard Class of 1956
Book Review Editor for Volume 5, 1955/56

FIRST WOMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF OF THE BUFFALO LAW REVIEW
Josephine Y. King Class of 1965
Editor in Chief for Volume 14, 1964/65

FIRST WOMAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN UB LAW GRADUATE
Barbara Merrweather Sims Class of 1955

FIRST LAW SCHOOL WOMEN’S GROUP
Association of Women Law Students began in 1974

FIRST WOMAN STUDENT BAR ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT
Rosemary Gerasis Roberts Class of 1976

FIRST WOMAN ADJUNCT PROFESSOR
Bertha Strootman Class of 1912
Taught Practical Aspects of Real Property 1918/19-1931/32

FIRST WOMEN ASSISTANT PROFESSORS
Josephine Y. King Class of 1965
Taught Torts and Procedure 1966/67
Barbara A. Kulzer Taught Property 1966/67

FIRST WOMAN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
Josephine Y. King Class of 1965
Taught Torts and Procedure 1967/68-1968/69

FIRST WOMAN TENURED PROFESSOR
Marjorie Girth
Taught Commercial Law and Bankruptcy from 1971/72-1990/91

FIRST WOMAN LAW LIBRARIAN AND ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF LEGAL RESEARCH
Mildred D. Miles Jaffe 1938/37-1938/39

FIRST WOMAN ASSISTANT DEAN
Marjorie C. Mix 1972/73-1973/74

FIRST WOMAN ASSOCIATE DEAN
Marjorie Girth 1986/87

FIRST WOMAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
Judy Scales-Trent
Associate Professor 1984/90
Professor 1990 to present

FIRST WOMAN HISPANIC ASSISTANT DEAN
Vivian Garcia
1981-1986 Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs

FIRST WOMAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN DEAN
Amandra Newell
1986-1994 Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs
1995-1998 Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs
FIRST WOMAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO LAW ALUMNI ASSOCIATION
Ilene R. Fleischmann
1985 to present

FIRST WOMAN PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO LAW ALUMNI ASSOCIATION
M. Dolores Denman Class of 1965
Served 1973-74

FIRST WOMAN TO RECEIVE THE JAECLE AWARD
M. Dolores Denman Class of 1965
Awarded in 1991

CAREER AND PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

FIRST WOMAN TO ARGUE AN APPEAL BEFORE THE NEW YORK COURT OF APPEALS
Helen Z.M. Rodgers Class of 1899

FIRST WOMAN TO PRESIDE OVER A NEW YORK STATE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION
Helen Z.M. Rodgers Class of 1899

FIRST WOMAN TO BE ELECTED A JUDGE IN ERIE COUNTY
Cecil B. Wiener Class of 1899
Elected in 1932 to the Erie County Children’s Court

FIRST WOMAN TO BE ELECTED A BUFFALO CITY COURT JUDGE
Madge Taggart Class of 1920
Elected to the Buffalo City Court in 1953 for a 10-year term
Elected to the Erie County Family Court in 1962, retired in 1967

FIRST WOMAN APPOINTED DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL IN THE NEW YORK STATE FRAUD PREVENTION BUREAU
Marie Teresa Scalzo Class of 1924

FIRST WOMAN GRADUATE ELECTED TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Winifred C. Stanley Class of 1933
Elected to the 78th Congress in 1942 as Delegate-at-Large
Served 1943-1945

FIRST WOMAN LAWYER ON THE UNITED NATIONS LEGAL STAFF
Carol McCormick Crosswell Smith Class of 1945

FIRST WOMAN ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE ERIE COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION
Maryann Saccomando Freedman Class of 1958
Served 1981/82

FIRST WOMAN ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK STATE BAR ASSOCIATION
Maryann Saccomando Freedman Class of 1958
Served 1987/88

FIRST WOMAN ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK STATE BAR FOUNDATION
Maryann Saccomando Freedman
Class of 1958
Served 1997 to present

FIRST WOMAN PERMANENTLY APPOINTED TO THE NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT, APPELLATE DIVISION
M. Dolores Denman Class of 1965
Given permanent status in 1983

FIRST WOMAN DESIGNATED AS PRESIDING JUSTICE OF THE NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT, APPELLATE DIVISION
M. Dolores Denman Class of 1965
Designated in 1991

FIRST UB LAW GRADUATE APPOINTED A FEDERAL COURT JUDGE
Melanie L. Cygarowski Class of 1981
Appointed to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Eastern District of New York in 1993

FIRST WOMAN UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
Denise E. O'Donnell Class of 1982
Appointed for the Western District of New York in 1998

FIRST UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO LAW SCHOOL UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT CLERK
Virginia A. Seitz Class of 1985
Clerked for Justice William J. Brennan Jr. 1986/87

FIRST WOMAN UB LAW GRADUATE TO WIN THE PRESTIGIOUS JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR “GENIUS” FELLOWSHIP
Sara Horowitz Class of 1989
Awarded in 1999 for a five-year period
Executive Director of Working Today