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the Homecoming: Erma Jaeckle '36 Receives the Law School's Highest Honor

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Gayle L. V. Eagan '85 and Albert R. Mugel '41, partners in Jaeckle, Fleischmann & Mugel, pay tribute to Erma Jaeckle
Spotlight on Women

Erma Hallett Jaeckle ’36 receives the Law School’s highest honor

It was all in the family for the 1999 Edwin F. Jaeckle Award, as UB Law School’s highest honor was bestowed upon Erma Hallett Jaeckle ’36, widow of the alumnus for whom the award was named.

A full house at a Nov. 6, 1999, luncheon paid tribute to Mrs. Jaeckle, whose 44-year career in the law included practice in both New York and Florida, in private practice, corporate work and government service. She and her husband, who died in 1992, are also noted for their philanthropy, including substantial gifts that have enabled the Law School to create and develop the Edwin F. Jaeckle Center for State and Local Government. The center trains law students for work in the public sector, and includes a widespread externship program that sends students into the community on a variety of assignments at government agencies.

“Mrs. Jaeckle forged a path-breaking, diverse and effective career in the law during times which were not always welcoming or supportive to women in the profession,” Dean Nils R. Olsen noted at the luncheon.

The honoree’s career was indeed diverse. One of four women in her graduating class, she worked for a negligence attorney, then practiced patent law at Carborundum Co. before joining the Coast Guard during World War II in the legal department of the Merchant Marine Division. After the war, she began working in the real property department of Moot & Sprague, in Buffalo. In 1950, her life took a difficult turn when her husband, a physician, died. She moved with her two young sons to St. Petersburg, Fla., to be near family.

There she practiced for a quarter-century as a trial lawyer specializing in matrimonial and child custody trials. She quickly attracted a large referral business from other attorneys who sent her cases they were unable to settle. She proved to be a rainmaker in many other areas as well, especially with respect to adoptions, estate planning and probate matters. Her firm evolved and she eventually formed the first one in her area whose partners were all female: Hallett, Ford & Thurman.

Mrs. Jaeckle was also involved in the community. She was a founder and first president of Altrusa International, a women’s service organization, and helped found the St. Petersburg Business and Professional Women’s Club, of which she was also the first president. She was a leader in the St. Petersburg Bar Association, serving as one of the first women on its executive board.

A homecoming of sorts came in 1977 when she married Edwin F. Jaeckle, returned to Buffalo and retired from the practice of law. The couple’s involvement with UB Law School continued and expanded, and it is for that service, as well as her exemplary legal career and public service in two states, that she was honored with the award that bears her late husband’s name.

Albert R. Mugel, a founding member of the firm now known as Jaeckle, Fleischmann and Mugel, and a 50-year professor at UB Law, noted that it was appropriate that this award came in a year that the school celebrated the centennial of its first women graduates. “When Erma joined the Coast Guard,” he said, “she did not think she was doing a man’s work. She was doing the citizens’ work. And in the practice of law down in Florida, she really did some great things. She operated at the top of the scale for legal work down there.”

“I hope we remember, as we go into the next century and women become even more prominent in the law, in fact maybe predominant in the law, that the leaders of the vanguard of the women were Erma Jaeckle and women of that era.”

In presenting the award, SUNY Distinguished Professor Thomas E. Headrick said: “Erma has been in many ways a pioneer — an example, as my parents use the word; a role model, in the contemporary idiom — for many people, both men and women, who have pursued and balanced the multiple demands of our profession, parenthood and public service. She has, again in the popular idiom, done it all.

“Erma Jaeckle has, over a successful career, taken up the challenges of the profession and life with quiet enthusiasm and, most important of all, with much more than a touch of class — indeed, with an abundance of class.”

Mrs. Jaeckle, accepting the award (and flowers from the women lawyers currently at Jaeckle, Fleischmann), expressed her thanks: “What I did, I did because I wanted to. It has been a pleasure.”

She also spoke highly of the Law School to which she and her late husband have devoted so much of their attention and resources. “I am amazed at the changes in the legal world and the manner in which the Law School is meeting these changes,” she said.

“It is mind-boggling to see the extensive clinical work being done. It is also remarkable how the courses have changed over the years. Taxation? Environmental law? Trusts and Future Interests? If you suggested them back then you would have been considered a candidate for psychiatric help. And these things are now so important to the Law School and to the legal profession. It is really an incredible thing.”

According to UB President and Professor of Law William R. Greiner, “You are an outstanding choice for the award that bears your late husband’s name. We at UB are extremely proud of all that you have done throughout your legal career to make the world a better place.”