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Law School News: Celebrating The First Women Lawyers In Rhode Island April 12, 2019

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April 12, 2019

Law School News

Celebrating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island

The dedication of a commemorative plaque at RWU Law, honoring the first 176 women to join the state bar, draws an overflow crowd celebrating strides made - and recognizing the work still to be done.



A group shot of First Women Lawyers of Rhode Island who attended Thursday's dedication event. Image Credit: RWU Law/David Silverman

April 12, 2019
Michael M. Bowden

BRISTOL, R.I., April 12, 2019– Nearly 300 attendees turned out Thursday evening when Roger Williams University School of Law hosted a special event commemorating the First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island, which featured the dedication of a plaque listing the names of these 176 pioneers in the law.

(See [photos of the event](#) here.)

The plaque, prominently mounted in the law school's second-floor Atrium, includes the names of the 176 known First Women, "and others unknown," along with the preamble: "Roger Williams University School of Law honors the pioneering First Women of the Rhode Island Bar (1920 to 1979). Their efforts helped establish the rightful place of women in the legal profession and a foundation upon which a more fully inclusive legal profession can be built."

The plaque was officially unveiled with a ribbon-cutting by Judith E. Hodge, Esq. Admitted to the bar in 1965, she was the earliest (23rd of 176) of the First Women attending the event.

“At RWU Law, we believe the profession should reflect the population it serves,” said Dean Michael J. Yelnosky. “We owe these women a debt of gratitude.”

Yelnosky added that the school plans on creating opportunities to celebrate these pioneers. “That’s one of the roles of a law school — to be a convener,” he said. “And I can tell you that the positive energy that I’ve felt when a group of these women have gathered to talk about the project is powerful.”

‘Glass-Ceiling Breakers’

The plaque dedication event, sponsored by Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C., featured comments from Professor Emily Sack; RWU Law student Christine Awe, president of the school’s Women’s Law Society; Rhode Island Superior Court Judge Netti Vogel; and Nicole Verdi ’14, president of the RWU Law Alumni Association.

“It’s been obvious from the start, and from the number of people here today, that this issue has resonated with many, many people,” Sack noted in her introduction. “This is truly a powerful moment for our legal community, for our law school, and most especially for our students as we focus on the continuing need to achieve gender equity in our profession.”

As the past has impacted the present, so will the present impact the future.

Appreciating that progression makes us recognize the vital need to remain active and vocal, and gives us the optimism to know we’re making a difference.

~ Judge Netti Vogel

Addressing the First Women present for the event, Awe cited Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s observation that, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” She added – to laughter and applause – “Thank you all for misbehaving. The marathon continues.”

In her comments, Verdi stressed the enormity of the strides made by the First Women, often while also managing households and raising large and busy families.

“The effect and impact of Rhode Island’s First Women is massive,” she said. “There is no way I can adequately articulate how monumental these women were and are. They epitomize the phrase, ‘glass-ceiling breakers.’ These women have broken so many barriers, and they did it at a time when breaking barriers was not only frowned upon, but also ridiculed and criticized.”

She emphasized that the struggle is ongoing.

“It’s on us, as women of the legal profession, to ensure we use our status to extend that same invitation to the next generation of female firsts – a generation that promises to be more diverse,

and that will shatter the most stubborn ceilings and kick down the most stubborn doors that remain,” Verdi said.

Speaking for the First Women present, Judge Vogel (admitted to the bar in 1975) opened her comments by evoking the tear-jerking final scene from the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*, when the players in later life visit a modern exhibition about pioneering women in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

“This is kind of *our* Hall of Fame,” she said. “I think that’s awesome.”

Vogel added that, in addition to the better-known pioneers on the First Women list, recognition was due to the unknowns among them.

“Some of these women may have abandoned their journey to join the legal profession before they reached any level of success,” Vogel said. “I cannot say that they hit a glass ceiling because they never entered the room. They weren’t invited. Certainly, any effort on the part of these women to compete equally with their brother lawyers would have been met with virtually insurmountable opposition by the bench, the bar, and society.”

Even now, she noted, much work remains to be done.

“Women entering the profession today are themselves not free from some level of discrimination,” Vogel said. “As the past has impacted the present, so will the present impact the future. The importance of recognizing the so-called pioneers of the women’s bar goes beyond gender discrimination. It is also important because newer lawyers and those about to join the profession – lawyers of color, gender-nonconforming lawyers, lawyers with disabilities, lawyers whose first language is not English – are still breaking down barriers.

“The women who were the legal pioneers of yesterday can be the teachers and mentors of the legal pioneers of today,” she concluded, addressing the students in the audience. “As I stood on the shoulders of the earlier generation of women lawyers, you’re standing on the shoulders of my generation, and future lawyers will stand on your shoulders. Appreciating that progression makes us recognize the vital need to remain active and vocal, and gives us the optimism to know we’re making a difference.”

An Onerous Path

The genesis of Thursday’s event occurred in 2017 at RWU Law’s annual Women in Robes event, which brings together RWU Law students and members of the Rhode Island judiciary.

In response, the staff at the RWU Law Library, headed by Nicole Dyszlewski, began the task of compiling a definitive list of the first women. Dyszlewski soon discovered, to her surprise, that “no one in Rhode Island had been tracking members of the bar by gender in any holistic way.” Accordingly, “that made researching the history of women lawyers in our state a rocky and uncertain road,” she said.

Just over a year after the research began, a First Women Steering Committee was convened, co-chaired by RWU Law Board members Connie Howes, Esq., and the Honorable Patricia Sullivan, who worked to explore how these women might best be remembered and honored. The dedication ceremony on April 11 is the product of their work.

Rhode Island's earliest female attorneys trod an onerous path: the state was the last in the entire country to admit women to the practice of law. In the year 1920 — as the country finally ratified the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote — the Rhode Island Board of Bar Examiners denied the application of Ada Lewis Sawyer (1892–1985) to sit for the bar exam. Sawyer only became an attorney after taking her case to the state's supreme court. The court ruled that the bar rules' reference to "person" with respect to admission to the bar did indeed include women as well.

"For a state which is known for being to the left of center in many ways, I was surprised at how long it took for Rhode Island to allow women to become attorneys," says Nicole Dyszlewski of the Roger Williams University School of Law Library. "It was so ingrained in the culture that women weren't seen as professional equals. Hearing the Ada Sawyer story — about how she had to fight and fight and fight to become a lawyer; that surprised and saddened me."

Though Sawyer fought to pave the way for Rhode Island women to become lawyers, the next several decades saw only a handful following in her path — but until recently, exactly how many remained a mystery. For much of the 20th century, there was simply no definitive record of these women anywhere.

"That posed a problem," explains Dyszlewski. "There was no searchable database that was complete. There was no list saying, 'Here, these are all the women!'"

So Dyszlewski and RWU Law embarked upon a vast and ambitious project that would take well over a year to complete: finding and documenting all of the "First Women" attorneys admitted to practice in Rhode Island from 1920 onward (it was eventually decided to cap the search at 1979). That task took on a new focus when Dyszlewski discovered a typewritten sheet among some papers donated to the RWU Law Library years earlier, listing around 50 female attorneys, beginning with Sawyer. It seemed to have been compiled in the 1970s. As research progressed, more and more names gradually emerged, eventually reaching the current total of 176.

Still, it was striking how slowly women became integrated into the Rhode Island bar. Though the first woman was admitted in 1920, it was not until 50 years later that the total number of women admitted to practice in Rhode Island reached 30.

The First Women Lawyers in Rhode Island dedication event was a beginning, not an end. We next plan to gather a group of volunteers to identify ways to keep a focus on the issue of gender equity in the legal profession. If you would like to volunteer, please contact us at firstwomenlaw@rwu.edu.

