Maryland Women Who Dare: Paving the Way to the New Millenium Maryland Women's History Display Kit

SALLY D. ADKINS JUDGE, COURT OF SPECIAL APPEALS

PROFILE

Appointed in 1996 as a Judge of the Circuit Court for Wicomico County, Sally Adkins became the first woman to serve as a trial court judge on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Two years later, Judge Adkins became the first woman appellate judge from the Eastern Shore, when she was appointed to the Maryland Court of Special Appeals. She helped pave the way for full acceptance of women in the legal profession and served as a mentor and role model for women in the law profession. She practiced law in Salisbury, Maryland for 20 years prior to being named a judge.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Area of Interest - Paving the Way

I became interested in the law when I was a child because my father was a lawyer, and he and my mother instilled in me a respect and love for reasoning and debate, hallmarks of our legal system. Although I considered other careers during college, I decided to apply to law school in my senior year. My choice was influenced in part by two professors of philosophy with whom I studied in my latter two years of college, and who inspired academic achievements I had not previously attained. I attended the University of Maryland Law School and then practiced law in Salisbury, Maryland for 20 years. My practice was general in nature — covering most areas of the law.

In 1991, I was appointed to be a Judge of the Circuit Court for Wicomico County by Governor Glendening. With this appointment I became the first woman to serve as a trial court judge on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Many Eastern Shore women, both within and outside the legal profession, expressed to me how much it meant to them personally to have a woman hold this visible, decision-making role in the justice system.

Two years later, in 1998, the position on Maryland's Court of Special Appeals for an Eastern Shore judge became vacant, and I was appointed to that court. This appointment gave me the opportunity to be the first woman appellate judge from the Eastern Shore. I joined the thirteen member appellate court, where two other women were then serving. On the Court of Special Appeals, we review all of the appeals from the decisions of the trial courts in Maryland.

Support and Barriers

Support: My parents taught me respect for learning, ideas, and knowledge, and that these could be my lifelong companions. My husband taught me to dream, and encouraged me to strive for achievements that I had not thought were within my grasp. Also important were friends I made in the course of my work and civic activities with whom I developed mutual relationships of respect and trust. These friends taught me the value of teamwork and collaborative effort. Knowing them also showed me how many diverse paths were available to achieve one's goals in life. In addition, organizations

focused on promoting women's role in the legal profession, such as the Women's Bar Association, provided group support essential to my advancement.

Barriers. Although 25% of my law school classmates were women, when I began practicing law in Salisbury in 1977, there were no other women practicing in the three counties of the lower Eastern Shore. Our communities are geographically distant from the urban areas – over a two-hour drive from Baltimore and Washington – and woman lawyers were still considered somewhat of an oddity. Thus, by virtue of timing, I was "paving the way" for other women to enter the field of law just by working hard and striving to be the best lawyer that I could. In the process, I experienced some attitudes on the part of other lawyers and potential clients that presented difficulties for me.

In general, many people could accept my education and thinking ability, but some doubted my ability to operate in the areas of law that involve a quality perceived to be exclusively male – assertiveness, particularly assertiveness presented with a dignified demeanor. Perceived to be missing this stereotyped "male" quality, I had more difficulty obtaining legal work involving litigation or difficult negotiations. On the other side of the coin, when I exhibited assertiveness, sometimes it was resented by male lawyers and others – in part because they did not expect such behavior from a woman. The passage of time, incremental successes, and adaptations to my personal approach to adversarial situations largely resolved this problem for me. Although women lawyers and other women can still encounter similar problems, there has been tremendous progress over the last 25 years in fully accepting women in the legal profession.

Role Models

Famous or long-distance role models have never been meaningful to me. I also consider it more difficult for a person of one gender to emulate the opposite gender in achieving the artistry that is required in the successful pursuit of one's profession. Thus, because the lawyers I knew were mostly men, I felt the absence of a woman mentor, particularly in the early years of my professional career. I have, and continue to try to assist younger women to pass more easily through the struggling years of their career paths.

Message for the Future

- Always listen well, and absorb the ideas of others, but believe in yourself and trust your own ideas. Be an independent thinker, and not a carbon copy of your friends, classmates or even your mentor. Identify your own strengths and develop them you cannot excel at everything.
- Understand your own values, and live by them. You will be respected and rewarded for doing so.
- Be willing to step out of your comfortable niche, and take an uncomfortable step toward advuncement, even if some risk is involved.
- Hard work is the great leveler there will always be others who are more confident, better public speakers, smarter, with more experience but hord work and preparation can put you right on their level or above.
- Remember that you will be forever learning, long after your school years have passed.