

# In 1955, woman judge greeted with skepticism

Journal, 18 September 1985

By CYNTHIA DURCANIN  
Journal staff writer

One Frederick County lawyer called it a disaster.

Others were simply flabbergasted in 1955 when they learned that a woman was about to receive an appointment to a Circuit Court judgeship.

Twenty-six years after Gov. Theodore McKeldin made Maryland history by appointing Kathryn Lawlor, now Kathryn Shook DuFour, to the Montgomery County Circuit Court bench, Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

After O'Connor's appointment in 1981, she sent DuFour, now 75, a letter saying, "You have helped pave the way all the way from Maryland."

And yet when DuFour was appointed to the bench, Washington still had a separate bar for women, she said in a recent interview.

Many in legal circles were skeptical over that first appointment of a woman to a Circuit Court judgeship, she recalled.

In fact, the judge DuFour replaced tried to persuade McKeldin to reconsider his appointment, she said.

Judge Charles W. Woodward, the retiring judge, told McKeldin the judiciary was no place for a woman, DuFour said.

As DuFour recalled, Woodward reminded McKeldin that as a judge, DuFour would have to hear murder and rape cases and would be exposed to all sorts of sordid details about people's lives.

"The governor simply thanked Woodward for coming to see him and then went ahead and appointed me," DuFour said.

DuFour, who retired in 1971 from the county Circuit Court bench, said she has never viewed her appointment as breaking through a sexual barrier.

"I was a judge who was a woman, not a woman who was a judge. I did not equate any of the problems I may have had on the bench with my sex," she said.

DuFour said she had few run-ins with any of the attorneys or other men who appeared before her. However, she vividly remembers one incident in which an attorney challenged her knowledge of the law during her second month on the bench.

The lawyer raised an objection to a question that DuFour overruled. Minutes later he raised the same objection, which she again overruled.

After he persisted in raising the same objection a third time, DuFour said she told him: "I was under the impression that you understood the law enough to try a case. Apparently I was wrong."

Maintaining her composure, DuFour said, "Do you understand, sir, that when I overrule an objection to a question, that ends it?"

"Now if you ask that question one more time, I shall hold you in contempt of court and have the sheriffs remove you immediately."

In no time, the word went out in legal circles that DuFour was no push-over, she said.

DuFour eventually became the chief judge of the county Circuit Court after 12 years on the bench and served a total of 16 years before retiring.

Of today's opportunities for women, DuFour said women are now accepted in any capacity.

"But I hate to see a woman put in any position she is not capable of . . . That hurts all women."

Before her appointment to the bench, DuFour ran her own law practice, was a member of the Montgomery County Council and a delegate to the General Assembly.



The Sentinel library

Judge Kathryn Shook DuFour made Maryland history in 1955 when she was appointed to the county Circuit Court. Twenty-six years later, she received thanks from Sandra Day O'Connor.