

WOMEN IN THI

Stories of Texas Legal Trailblazers

BY ANGELA DORAU AND BRENDA GUNN

THOUGH WOMEN BEGAN TO EARN LAW DEGREES in Texas around the turn of the century, they could not participate in a fundamental part of the judicial system — sitting on a jury — until 1954. Today women make up about one-third of the Texas Bar. They serve on courts at all levels and are executives and partners in prestigious firms and multi-national companies.

In celebration of Texas women lawyers who paved the way for others, the University of Houston Law Center, as part of its 50th anniversary celebration, hosted a symposium, “In Re: Women in Law — Stories of Texas Legal Trailblazers.” About 200 people, mostly women, participated in the program which featured prominent Texas women lawyers relating their experiences — both successes and challenges.

The ventures of trailblazers are lonely ones, warned **Irene Merker Rosenberg**, the Royce R. Till Professor of Law at the U. of H. Law Center, where she was the first woman to earn tenure.

“Trailblazers aren’t involved in a close, photo-finish race in their endeavors, but rather are clear winners who are practicing far in front of the pack.”

Sarah Weddington, the Austin attorney who, at 26, made history winning the *Roe v. Wade* case in the U.S. Supreme Court, served as moderator of the panel presentation. “Some [of us] are rainmakers, most of us are making drizzle. So, there are still challenges,” she said. However, she noted, the challenges are more subtle today. The lessons of the past, she hopes, can teach women entering the profession today how to deal with those obstacles.

No stranger to challenges, **Carol Egret Dinkins**, a partner at Vinson & Elkins, was one of the first female partners in a major Texas law firm. “It took a while for women to get situated in the Houston legal community,” she explained. She made partner in the firm after seven years of hard work. Her promotion was news throughout the state, even earning mention in *Texas Monthly*. Dinkins was appointed U.S. assistant attorney general and later deputy attorney general during the Reagan Administration. As deputy attorney general, she was one of the highest-ranking women in the administration.

Dinkins career goals are “to do good work, to get good work, to work with good people who are good at what they do, to grow, to do some good, and to have fun.” With her stature and position, she now feels it is the responsibility of those with power to advance worthy colleagues, to recognize merit, hard work, and creative thinking, and to promote diversity. Dinkins, a commissioner on the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commis-



sion, is active as chair and co-chair of two American Bar Association sections, a record for the ABA, but just another first for this woman lawyer who is accustomed to blazing trails.

Judge **Ruby Kless Sondock** was the first woman to serve on the Texas Supreme Court on a permanent basis.

Sondock took and passed the bar with 15 hours remaining on her degree after a friend going through a divorce encouraged her to take responsibility for her life. Sondock said interviews for graduating women were hard to come by in 1961, but she lucked out and landed an interview and part-time job. Sondock only later realized how fortunate she really was, as she worked on “plum” cases and even argued before the Texas Supreme Court in her first year of practice.

She eventually opened her own firm, and was appointed to the Harris County Court of Domestic Relations No. 5 in January 1973, making her the first woman judge in Harris County. Appointed by Gov. Briscoe to the civil bench of the 234th District Court in 1977, Sondock served until 1989, with only a short six-month pause in 1982 when she served as Texas’ first permanent female member of the Texas Supreme Court. Today, with a full-time mediation practice, she credits luck, hard work, and a fairy godmother for her good fortune.

Hard work propelled Judge **Gabrielle Kirk McDonald** to the top of her class at Howard University Law School in 1966. McDonald said she never really had a life plan and was never motivated by prestige, power, or influence. She let intuition guide her decisions. After graduation, she worked for the Legal Defense Fund in the South where she did civil rights work in the area of employment law.

During this experience she developed her lifelong motto, “if you are going to do something, do it the best you can and don’t make short cuts.”

After moving to Houston in 1969, she practiced law with her husband. The two earned a reputation for taking on corporate giants. McDonald also taught law at The University of Texas and St. Mary’s schools of law. In 1977, she became the



Sarah Weddington



Judge Ruby Kless Sondock



Sissy Farenthold



Irene Merker Rosenberg and Carol E. Dinkins

first female African American from Texas to serve on the federal bench — a position to which she had never aspired. McDonald was a federal judge for nine years. She was about to accept a teaching position at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law when she learned that she was being considered for a United Nations Tribunal judgeship. The U.N. General Assembly elected 11 judges and McDonald received the most votes ever cast for a judge. She sits in The Hague in the Netherlands and had the oppor-

tunity to preside over the first war trial since Nuremberg.

McDonald balked at being credited with historical achievements until her son remarked, “Mom, you’re not old, you’re just ahead of your time.”

Frances T. “Sissy” Farenthold discussed what she called her “path to feminism,” stressing that her views were her own and that no woman can speak for any other woman. Farenthold told of her trials and tribulations as a lawyer, mother, and candidate for political office during times of political protest and changing legal landscape.

She recounted some of her experiences with gender and racial discrimination — as one of three female law students in a class of 800 at The University of Texas School of Law, as director of a legal aid office in Corpus Christi, as a legislator protesting the government in South Texas, and as a candidate for governor in 1972 and 1974. After four years as president of Wells College, she has practiced law in Houston since 1980.

Farenthold’s trail from the legal aid office to running for governor showed her the extremes of the legal profession and politics. She has questioned the role women play in every position she has occupied and described the sometimes painful conclusions she has reached. Farenthold stressed her belief that, ultimately, one’s greatest freedom is the freedom to think and express one’s own conclusions.

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