

# IN TRIBUTE

## The Honorable Norma L. Shapiro Legend, Leader, & Mentor to Bench and Bar

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By Kathleen D. Wilkinson

**O**n July 22, 2016, we lost Judge Norma Levy Shapiro, a trailblazing attorney who was elected to become the first woman Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, but made a life-changing decision that catapulted her career and recognition. Instead of ascending as Chancellor Norma Shapiro, she was nominated to the U. S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, becoming the first woman federal judge on any court in the Third Circuit. While she accepted the invitation to join the court, she never wavered in her support of the Association.

Born on July 27, 1928 as Norma Levy, she graduated from Cheltenham High School, eventually becoming a Hall of Fame member. She received her bachelor of arts degree from the University of Michigan and a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School. After clerking for Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice

Horace Mann, she went into private practice at Dechert Price and Rhoads (now Dechert LLP), where she became the first woman partner. As a devoted mother to three sons, Finley, Neil and Aaron, and wife to Bernie Shapiro, a doctor of nuclear medicine, she deftly balanced work and life.

Judge Shapiro and I met more than





Judge Shapiro with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in 2013.



Judge Shapiro with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 2013.

“[E]very birthday, for 20 plus years, I could count on Norma to come to my chambers with a wrapped gift, usually a golf trinket she had picked up during the year just for me. She delighted in brightening the lives of her colleagues and she did so in so many ways.”

- Judge Marjorie O. Rendell

“Norma was very much my mentor. When I went back into practicing law in 1971 and decided not to apply in Philadelphia, Norma helped place me and then sent me a number of clients. Most importantly, she always wanted to know my aspirations and tailored her advice with those in mind.”

- Judge Anita Brody

20 years ago. Ever since, I have observed how influential and respected she was not only by the Association, but also by the Pennsylvania and American Bar Associations. She was a champion for women in the legal profession, regularly attending and actively participating in the Philadelphia Bar Association’s Women in the Profession Committee, the Commission on Women of the Pennsylvania Bar Association and more.

Judge Shapiro would drive long distances to attend Pennsylvania Bar Association meetings around the state and would fly across the country to participate in ABA events, and many times I was along for the ride. She was involved with the Judicial Division of the ABA and their representative in the ABA House of Delegates. Every year she would sit with the Pennsylvania Delegation to the ABA, joining us for dinner the night before the meeting, well after she was 80 years old.

To me and the women attorneys she mentored, Judge Shapiro was approachable, kind, caring and maternal. She would hold lunches in her chambers, serving iced tea along with sandwiches on fine china, and listen intently to her guests, offering advice and any help she could give to help us succeed. Ever attentive to detail, Judge Shapiro was known for sending hand-written thank-you notes and writing letters of congratulation whenever someone she knew received an award or distinction, and notes to convey her condolences to someone after a personal loss. After Judge Shapiro passed, I remembered how she wrote to me about the “grievous loss of one’s mother” after my mother passed away.

Judge Shapiro played a major role in helping to further diversity within the Association. Reviewing Association agendas from the 1970s showed how gender and race were starting to be looked at by the profession, and these records showed her deep commitment as one of the few women lawyers pushing for equal treatment. The need for establishing a Women’s Rights Committee and trying to get women lawyers involved in committees and on the Board of Governors were just a few of her goals. In a video-recorded interview for the Association many years later, she spoke about how important the Association has been in her life and why it is important that every Philadelphia lawyer join it. Diversity in the Association and in the practice of law was not yet a core value like it is today, and Judge Shapiro was ahead of her time when she began working on these issues.

Her life changed, though, when Judge Thomas N. O’Neill Jr., a dear friend from Penn Law School and a former Chancellor of



Judge Shapiro with U.S. District Court Judge Nitza I. Quiñones Alejandro (left) and the author.

the Association, told her that President Carter was going to appoint a qualified woman to the federal bench, and that she should throw her name into the hat.

Judge Shapiro committed herself to her position on the bench, making sure attorneys followed the rules and adhered to deadlines, while continuing her outside activities as well, particularly pro bono work. I observed her work tirelessly on prisoners' rights cases. She once gave me a pro bono assignment to act as a guardian ad litem, advising the court on whether a prisoner understood his rights. After I met with the prisoner, she showed her gratitude by issuing an order that included language that the court "thanked me for my service." Judge Shapiro expected a lot of her mentees, but never let it go unrecognized.

Granting U. S. citizenship was also very important to the judge. As Chancellor in 2013, I was honored to have participated with her in several Naturalization Ceremonies sponsored by the Association, occasionally bringing my father, whose parents were from Germany and Austria. Approximately 100 immigrants took the Oath of Citizenship at each ceremony and became naturalized U.S. citizens. Judge Shapiro, a child of Russian immigrants herself, always found the

"[A] remarkable trailblazer, distinguished and courageous judge, and a shining role model, invaluable mentor and beloved friend to so many other judges and lawyers. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said it best: Judge Shapiro followed the credo of Gaius, an ancient Roman official, as she 'lent her light to countless lamps.'"

~ Roberta Liebenberg

right words to say to welcome these new Americans

However, while Judge Shapiro was well known within the court as a collegial judge, she was also famously hardworking and tenacious. In a settlement conference with IBM, she asked for its CEO to get on the phone. When she was told that the CEO could not be reached, she told the attorney that "IBM is the largest communication company in the world, how can you not

reach the CEO?" They located the CEO and put him on the phone.

In 1993, Judge Shapiro was the first recipient of the Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Award, the highest award given to a woman attorney by the Association, presented to a lawyer who has mentored other women and is recognized as a leader in her field. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, personally presented the award



Judge Shapiro with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Award recipients and others in 2013.

“Norma Shapiro was one of the most caring individuals I have ever met. She cared deeply about the law and about fairness to people affected by it. She cared about the court as an institution, but especially about her court family.”

~ Judge Marjorie O. Rendell

to her, saying how thrilled she was that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg would soon be joining her on the bench, crediting the progress of women in the law to the efforts of not only Justice Ginsburg, but also of Judge Shapiro.

Always engaged in helping women lawyers be the very best we could be, in 1999 Judge Shapiro received the very prestigious ABA Margaret Brent Award, presented by the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession.

In 2013, the Association hosted Justice O'Connor on the 20th anniversary of the creation of the award in her name. Judge Shapiro was present (her 35th year on the bench) along with other award winners. There was a huge audience, filling the Grand Ballroom of the Hyatt at the Bellevue. Then, on Dec. 10 of that year, the Association bestowed upon Judge

Shapiro its most prestigious judicial honor, the Justice William J. Brennan Distinguished Jurist Award, in recognition of her adherence to the highest ideals of judicial service and her significant, positive impact on the quality and administration of justice.

Only a few months before her passing, Judge Shapiro was presented with the Anne X. Alpern Award by the Pennsylvania Bar Association Commission on Women in May 2016. This award is given to a woman lawyer who demonstrates excellence in her field, making a significant impact on women in the law. This was particularly special, as Alpern served as the first woman attorney general of Pennsylvania, as well as in the nation. In a moving speech accepting the award, Judge Shapiro said that there is still work to be done in the advancement of women in the profession, and we must all continue to be diligent.

Judge Shapiro was one of the most respected woman leaders and jurists in the country. Although she had taken senior status in her later years, she continued to hold a large case load despite serious physical challenges, and was still working up to the time of her death, even as she was receiving medical treatment.

I was touched to be asked by the Association to present, before its Board of Governors, an “In Memoriam” resolution in honor of Judge Shapiro. The Association’s Women in the Profession Committee and its 2016 Cochairs Jennifer Coatsworth and Amber Racine also participated in drafting the resolution.

We are fortunate that we learned from Judge Norma Shapiro’s wisdom and had her in our midst. It is with extreme fondness that I offer this tribute to her. ■

*Kathleen D. Wilkinson (kathleen.wilkinson@wilsonelser.com), partner, Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker LLP, and zone one governor, Pennsylvania Bar Association, is a past Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association.*