

# THE WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT AT COLUMBIA LAW SCHOOL

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Inspiration for undertaking an oral history project centering on the lives of women graduates of Columbia Law School came as a direct result of two events. The first was a panel sponsored by the Women's City Club in New York entitled "Success Stories: Women Graduates of Columbia Law School." Speaking at that event in March 1994 were Edith Spivack '32, Ida Klaus '31, Honorable Priscilla Hall '73, Honorable Kristin Booth Glenn '66, Lynn Hecht Schafran '74, and Susan B. Lindenauer '64. Interest and energy sparked by this panel carried over to a second event: the formation of the Alumnae of Columbia Law School in 1996. Women graduates of the Law School from across the country held meetings in the spring and fall of that year to establish an organization that would increase the standing of women lawyers in the profession.

The Alumnae organized specific committees to carry out their stated mission "to support and enhance the professional development of the women of Columbia Law School." While many of these committees focused on career development and advancement, mentoring, careers in public interest law, issues concerning women of color, and flexible work arrangements, one committee took a look backwards over the seventy-year span that women have been attending the Law School. This committee on the Celebration of the Admission of Women to Columbia Law School is coordinating plans for the seventy-fifth anniversary celebration of the admission of women to CLS, which will be celebrated in 2002. To recognize and honor the manifold accomplishments of the Law School's earliest women graduates, the idea of collecting oral histories of these women offered an immediate opportunity to capture stories of their varied careers begun at a time when few women entered the legal profession. In the fall of 1996, Jane Bickford, then Associate Dean for Alumni/ae Relations, sent out letters to women graduates announcing plans for an oral history project to "preserve the stories and voices" of Columbia Law's alumnae. Response to her letter was both gratifying and strong. The Women's Oral History Project, ably chaired by Susan B. Lindenauer '64 and Anne E. Cohen '85, was launched with considerable energy and skill.

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Working closely with the Development Office, the Oral History committee (which was comprised of women and men) first compiled a list of women in the Law School during the 1930s and 1940s. From the outset, the committee decided to include women who had attended the Law School but had not completed their studies, as well as women who earned the LL.B., as the degree was then called. Inclusivity was critical in order to paint a full picture of the circumstances faced by women students who were single-digit percentages of each entering class. When the project started, there were twenty-six living alumnae from the 1930s and ninety-nine from the 1940s. Members of the committee felt a great sense of urgency to interview women from the 1930s as soon as possible.

A major oral history project like this could not be undertaken without training the participants in the standard techniques and methods of conducting oral history interviews. The Oral History department of Columbia's libraries cooperated in offering a workshop for all volunteer interviewers designed to familiarize them with the dynamics of conducting an interview, along with practical details on the operation of tape recorders. One of the first steps was to develop appropriate topics to be explored as part of each interview. The interview outline covered background (family, educational, professional), the decision to attend law school (expectations, family reaction, advice from others), and choosing Columbia (reasons why, experience with other schools). A large part of the interview was to be devoted to the three years spent in Kent Hall, the University's law school building at that time. These first women's recollections of confronting a predominantly male campus in the company of predominantly male classmates and a totally male law faculty provide a rich vein of detailed information. Questions designed to elicit reaction to the "Columbia experience" touched on attitudes of male students, favored or feared classes, social life, professional goals, attitudes of faculty members, class participation, and participation in student activities. Once out of law school, women graduates faced further challenges in searching for a first job. Here the questions delve into prejudice and bias by asking about ethnic, gender, or religious obstacles which made job hunting more difficult. Questions were also framed to discover whether the law school had helped in job hunting, or with dealing with expectations at firms and in the government regarding opportunities for women students.

Finally, the interview was to conclude with a discussion of the woman's professional experience: whether the lawyer embarked upon a public interest, corporate, government, or teaching career; whether salary or promotional differences were noticed; whether legal training affected choices made about family. The interview also asked if the woman had encouraged children/grandchildren, either male or female, to pursue a legal career. All told, these carefully phrased questions probed to the core of the experience of

women lawyers.

More valuable help came from Professor Martha Albertson Fineman, whose graduate students were already involved in a history project documenting women in the legal profession. After perusing government reports, newspapers, and popular literature, Professor Fineman's students assembled background information packets to inform interviewers of major political events, social habits, and economic issues of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In addition, Fineman's students prepared historical summaries touching on cultural history, legal jurisprudence, and women in the law which were fundamental for orienting interviewers to the legal milieu of that time. These information packets also contained modern discussions of women's entry into the legal profession taken from recent law reviews.

At the outset, thirteen interviewers (both men and women, all Columbia Law graduates) volunteered, were trained, and were assigned to do sixty-six interviews with women who studied in the Law School during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of two years, twenty interviews were completed and reviewed, with organizational assistance underwritten by Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton and transcription services provided by Debevoise and Plimpton. Women who were interviewed included Susan E. Bedell '44, Florence Driezen-Barth '41, H. Alberta Colcaser '39, Ruth Gersen Reichbart '36, Sara Portnoy '49, Leona G. Russell '32, Edith Spivack '32, Edith Fisch '48, Gertrude G. Michelson '47, Florence L. Riley '35, Theodora S. Zavin '43, Griselda P. Lobell '38, Annette Elstein '42, Ida Klaus '31, Isabel B. Walsh '39, Ruth Tachna '37, Charlotte T. Walkup '34, and Virginia G. Watkin '49.

As the interviewers quickly noticed, preparing and conducting an interview was very labor intensive and time consuming, although all thought it was exhilarating to hear first hand accounts from the vanguard of women graduates. To keep this large project moving forward in a timely fashion, two members of the Oral History department, Ronald J. Grele and Mary Marshall Clark, were asked to review the committee's progress and to offer suggestions. They immediately noticed that interviewers were overburdened with their assignments, because all the volunteers, though willing, had demanding responsibilities at work even before adding the long hours of preparation necessary to conduct an interview. To remedy this situation, they suggested that professional interviewers familiar with the legal profession be hired to sustain the project. They also suggested that the scope of questions

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewers were Diane Abrams '64, Karen S. Boxer '74, Anne Cohen '85, Evan Davis '69, Bruce Gould '53, Janice Tudy Jackson '92, Susan B. Lindenauer '64, Sara Portnoy '49, Elaine Reiss '64, Susan Stayn '95, Quiche Suzuki '91, Ruth Tachna '37, and Sarah Wilson '90. Also participating as interviewers from the Law Development Office were Jane Bickford and Pamela Green.

during the interview be enlarged to cover the career history of each interviewee. From the interviews that had been conducted, it was already clear that some career patterns were emerging, especially employment opportunities for women lawyers in New Deal agencies. Government agencies were more receptive to women lawyers than most law firms, a fact which enabled Columbia Law's graduates to embark on fulfilling careers, sometimes in fields of law that were just developing, such as labor law, telecommunications, and advertising law. It was important, therefore, to add women's work experience to these interviews as well as their subjective experience of entering a profession dominated by men.

Members of the committee are giving serious consideration to recommendations of the Oral History department. At this point, organizational details are still being worked on for the best way to continue the Women's Oral History Project so that publications can be ready in time for 2002, the year targeted for a celebration of seventy-five years of women at Columbia Law School.