

THE RBG I KNEW

I might not have become a Rutgers Law School alum were it not for Professor Ruth Bader Ginsburg (with an assist from the only other female tenured faculty member at the time -- Eva Morreale). The year was 1967 and we lived at the Colonnades in Newark within walking distance of the law school, we being my husband Frank and my three young children: Andrea, 4 years old; Jonathan, 3 years old; and Daniel, 3 months old. If I were to go to law school, Rutgers – Newark was my only option.

Frank had already become a faculty member in 1966. When my application for admission was reviewed, the male faculty members insisted there could be no room for the spouse of a faculty member. That was when Ruth and Eva fought for me and I was admitted with a restriction – that I was to take no courses from non-tenured faculty members. (That restriction was subsequently lifted after my first semester when I aced my courses).

Actually, I had met Ruth at social events before my freshman year because she and Frank were colleagues. We had discussed the time she spent in Sweden at Lund University in the early sixties when she co-authored a book on Comparative Law. She told me how Sweden was so far ahead of the United States in gender equity and women in the law. She had observed an eight-months pregnant Judge on the bench.

During my first semester, I was in her Civil Procedure class. She was so focused on her lecture that she would not take questions until she completed her well-prepared and understandable discourse. Even though our exams were graded anonymously, there were five top grades in that class and all were earned by women students even though women were fewer than 3% of the class. I assumed we were all on the same wave length. Ditto for a later class in Conflicts.

Before the age of political correctness, we had an annual Libel Play. A student playing Professor Ginsburg was lecturing on stage to the audience while another student slipped behind her and unzipped the back of the dress she was wearing which fell to the floor. Undeterred, she continued to lecture in her slip. She and her daughter Jane in the audience laughed heartily.

Having demonstrated to her that I wasn't just Frank's dumb wife, she trusted me to oversee her cases and notify her if any required action while she was in Sweden during the summer of 1970. That trip became a blessing. When she returned from Sweden, she asked if I needed child care for my three children, now 7, 6 and 3-years old because she had sponsored a woman from Jamaica but had met a Swedish au pair whom she hired for her two children. I was now set to seek employment.

I owe her a debt of gratitude for not only opening the door to Rutgers Law School for me but also to free me to pursue my legal career.

Marilyn Askin, Esq.