

## 25 YEARS OF PROGRESS FOR WOMEN AT VERMONT LAW SCHOOL

Linda O. Smiddy\*

Welcome to the *Women Making Waves* symposium edition of the *Vermont Law Review*—a celebration of women's accomplishments, an exploration of the complexities of our lives today and an inspiration to press on with the work that lies ahead. The conference organizers asked me to provide a Vermont Law School context for many of issues we are about to address—a brief history, as it were, of women's progress here at Vermont Law School from the perspective of one who is a VLS graduate, law professor, and recovering academic dean. These different roles have enabled me to observe the school from a number of vantage points. I welcome the opportunity to share a few of my observations.

Let me begin with our students, and with a flashback to the class of 1979 which had a total of twenty-two women, a number then considered a cause for celebration. Just three years earlier, in the class of 1976, women had numbered only four. The twenty-two women students in the class of 1979 were heady with the sense of establishing a strong female presence at the school, clearly a daunting task. In those days, the waves made by this small band of women were not the tidal waves of accomplishment this conference celebrates. They were waves of a different type—the waves of a few female hands, defiantly raised in the air on up-stretched arms, signaling a female presence that was determined to stay. At times those waves seemed to be only futile gestures, often overlooked or completely ignored, gestures that reverberated with the sound of one hand clapping.

Back then, during the lulls between launching beachheads on unchartered shores and developing new strategies when our progress seemed slow, we passed the time counting the numbers of women—usually on only one hand, often only from zero to one. The first woman editor of the law review, the first female president of the Student Bar Association, the first woman on a national moot court team, the first woman judicial law clerk, the first woman

---

\* B.A., Northwestern University; M.A.T., Harvard University; J.D., Vermont Law School; LL.M., Yale University Law School. Vermont Law School faculty member since 1986. Previously: Manager, IBM, Kingston, N.Y.; Law Clerk, The Honorable James S. Holden, Chief Judge, United States District Court, District of Vermont, Rutland, Vt.; Associate, Litigation Department and Computer Law Group, Cravath, Swaine and Moore, New York, N.Y.; Partner and Of Counsel, Smiddy and Smiddy, Woodstock, Vt. Professor Smiddy is an elected member of the American Law Institute, serves as Vermont Commissioner to the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, chaired the committee responsible for revising Vermont's Business Corporation Law and serves as Vermont liaison to the ABA Standing Committee on the Revised Model Business Corporation Act, and as the director of a Vermont bank. She has written articles on transborder data flow, the law of slavery, and corporate law, and is co-author of *CORPORATIONS AND OTHER BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS: CASES, MATERIALS AND PROBLEMS* (4th ed.1997). Professor Smiddy teaches Contracts, Corporate Law, and Corporate Finance.

to graduate at the top of her class. And so it went. Today we no longer count female leaders at Vermont Law School. We do not even think about it. It would take too much time and too many fingers and toes. Women routinely compose forty-five to fifty percent of each entering class; women routinely serve as campus leaders; women routinely win awards of distinction; women routinely attain highly competitive legal employment. In short, here at Vermont Law School, women students have established a forceful presence that has become the norm. And they have done so with the support and encouragement of the entire community.

Women faculty also have a story to tell. Numbers are one part of it. Twenty years ago there were just two female faculty members; both were in the legal writing department. Today, women number more than one-third of the tenured faculty, five of seven tenure-track faculty and half of the full time contract faculty. Women faculty are paid the same as their male counterparts, and they teach subjects throughout the curriculum, including corporations, taxation, corporate finance, civil procedure, contracts, and evidence. Three of the five members of the Legal Writing Department are women. At Vermont Law School women faculty chair key law school committees. They have made their presence known in the larger spheres of professional life, serving as leaders and committee chairs of national and state organizations, participating as panelists and moderators of state, national and international conferences, spearheading legislative reform, and publishing treatises, casebooks and articles on a wide range of subjects. Despite—or perhaps because of—the school's location in rural Vermont, there is a vitality that animates women's professional life here—a vitality that we now take for granted. Opportunities for the advancement of women faculty have also become the norm, again with the encouragement and support of the entire community.

There is, however, an additional characteristic of the women faculty at Vermont Law School that is worth mentioning. When considered together, we present quite an assortment of age, background, interests, philosophy and life choices. Thankfully, this variety is evidenced in the female members of the legal profession as a whole. It is a welcome relief from the 1970s when women were setting their course as professionals in the law and had few beacons to beam the way. Sometimes their uncertainties about professional self definition were expressed in conventions of dress. I recall a panel discussion during the late 1970s on the subject of women in the legal profession. It seemed that each panelist conformed to one of two dress codes for women lawyers. Some dressed in women's navy blue pin striped Brook Brothers suits, white shirts—not blouses—and dark, ribbon neckwear tied in a bow. The others wore knobby tweed pants suits, heavy metal jewelry and carried oversized leather handbags. As female law students and recent

graduates paused to consider the apparent paucity of alternatives, they began to query, "Where do we fit in?" That is another question long since consigned to the archives. Despite the varied attributes of the women faculty, however, some goals continue to elude us. For example, few women of color have counted among our numbers.

At Vermont Law School, women also have a decided presence in other school groups. Women have established a presence as members of our administration and our board of trustees. Women alumnae have successful professional lives, and women staff members serve on important committees and have achieved recognition in professional organizations. In short, at Vermont Law School, women are have a strong presence, and we make a difference in all aspects of the life of the school.

Although it is impossible to capture a time and a place in a few short sentences, let me conclude with a few brief observations. Women at Vermont Law School have come a long way, but we are still on the journey. Women here, like women everywhere, continue to struggle with the added responsibilities that accompany success, with the complexities of conflicting and ill-defined roles, with the need to press forward toward uncertain goals. However, a pause to look back twenty-five years reminds us that overall, Vermont Law School is a good place for a woman to be—for the strength of our presence here, for the opportunities we take for granted, for the successes that have become the norm, and for the questions we no longer have to ask.

