

March 2011 Bar Bulletin

KCBA Fondly Remembers Two of Its Own

Mary Wechsler: A Shining Light

By Judge Mary Alice Theiler

At a gathering of family and friends at Mary's home after her death, her daughter Risa talked about the pancake breakfasts that Mary would make for Risa and her girlfriends after sleepovers. While the girls chattered away about school and social interests, Mary would unobtrusively stand at the stove making lots and lots of little pancakes, asking the occasional question. In retrospect, Risa realized the effectiveness and wisdom of her mother's subtle presence. The girls got breakfast, and Mary learned more than she would have with a more direct approach.



I love this story because it rings so true. Mary, who passed away on January 21, was an extremely effective leader and an attorney of great distinction because she was patient, focused and pragmatic. She was also a person of impeccable character and integrity, with a strong commitment to social justice.

She chose to build a law practice in an area of perhaps the greatest animosity and rawest emotions — family law. Mary was universally acknowledged to be a calm, reasonable and effective advocate, and a formidable opposing counsel. She was highly regarded and nationally recognized for her professionalism, hard work, honesty and courtesy. At the same time, she was deeply and fiercely committed to her family, and enjoyed life to the fullest. She was the Total Package.

Many of us knew Mary only as a highly regarded member of our profession, but she also had quite a life before she became a lawyer. Born in Green Bay, Wisconsin, to parents who were active in the civil rights movement, Mary spent a summer tutoring on the West Side of Chicago and marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Admitted to the University of Chicago on an early-decision basis, Mary contemplated a career in medicine, but took a leave of absence to spend a year working with low-income families on the East Coast as a VISTA volunteer. Transferring to the University of Washington in 1969, she worked with mentally disabled adults at the Fircrest school and with emotionally disturbed children at the Ryther facility, obtaining both a teaching certificate and a B.A. in psychology.

Her interest in children led her to serve as a foster parent for DSHS for a number of years, and then as a head teacher and administrator at a small alternative school in Seattle. But after taking a joint law school course on constitutional issues in education for continuing teaching credits, Mary was inspired to go to law school. The rest, as they say, is history.

Mary and I served together on the Board of Trustees of the King County Bar Association and she succeeded me as president of KCBA in 1994. Along with Alice Paine, the KCBA executive director, we traveled together to meetings of the American Bar Association and the National Conference of Bar Presidents. Meeting the triumvirate of “Mary, Alice, and Mary Alice,” our bar president colleagues from around the country would ask if there had ever been any male presidents of KCBA. “Oh yes,” we said, “maybe a few.”

Mary was named Outstanding Attorney by the Washington State Bar Association Family Law Section in 1988 and Outstanding Attorney by the King County Bar Association in 1999. She served on the Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Committee and was selected to admission in the prestigious American Academy of Matrimonial Attorneys. She was president of the Washington State chapter of the American Judicature Society, and was strongly committed to maintaining the independence and integrity of the judicial system.

Mary was diagnosed in late 2009 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease) and retired from her law practice in April 2010. In typical Mary style, she found joy in the opportunity to indulge her love of reading and to spend time with good friends and family. She is survived by David Sellinger, her husband of 30 years; her daughter Risa Wechsler; her sons Kirk and Michael Sellinger; her mother Helen; and four siblings. Mary’s father Don, whom she described as her “hero,” passed away last summer after a long illness.

She leaves a great and varied legacy — the clients whom she served so faithfully, the organizations that benefited so greatly from her contributions, the family and friends that she loved so much, and the memory of her grace and strength and her wonderful smile.

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