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90th anniversary of women law graduates at Loyola

Thomas M. Haney

History was made 90 years ago when, at the law school's graduation on June 10, 1925, Margaret C. Byrne walked across the stage and was awarded her law degree. Minutes later she was followed by four of her women classmates: Camille Caravetta, Celia M. Gilmore, Jessie McGreever and Alice Mary O'Kane.

After all-male graduations since the school's founding in 1908, five women broke the barrier and led a procession of professional women that continues unabated until today.

As late as the spring of 1921, the university could advertise that its "medical and sociological schools" admitted women - but not the other schools. By September of that year, however, with the appointment of Frederic Siedenburg, S.J., as the regent (the voice of the university administration in its various schools) for the law school, all that changed. Siedenburg led the law school to open its doors to a wide diversity of applicants – not only women but also African Americans (as described in "Paving the Way for African American Students" in the Spring 2015 issue of *Loyola Law Magazine*) and others.

Some of these women had already earned at least an undergraduate degree; Gilmore had not only graduated from Chicago Normal College, but had both B.S.

and M.A. degrees from Loyola. She would later go on to earn an LL.M. degree at Loyola in 1929. When she passed away in 1936, the university's alumni magazine memorialized her as "a pioneer woman law student and one of the most enthusiastic and loyal alumnae of the School of Law."

These women had apparently started at the law school in fall 1923. The 1925 university yearbook states that the all-male class that began in fall 1922 were joined "starting their sophomore year ... [by] coeds. The effect of the coeducational change was clearly shown on the students and, may we add, on the professors." It's not clear from the available records how the school publicized its new openness to women, but word obviously got out and elicited numerous responses.

The enrollment of women posed some problems for the school. According to the 1924 yearbook, it needed additional space in the Ashland Block in the Loop, where it had been housed since it first opened its doors, to accommodate the new situation; among the facilities acquired that year was "a ladies' rest room."

Loyola's first five women graduates were not alone at the school for much of their stay there, for three more women received their law degrees the following year: Marion Grace Bremner, Evangeline C. Hursen and Clara Walsh Morris.

Within a year of their arrival, the women had organized a chapter of Kappa Beta Pi, a national legal sorority founded in 1908 at Chicago-Kent College of Law. By 1923, around the time the women at Loyola were organizing their chapter, Kappa Beta Pi had 23 chapters around the country. Interestingly, the *Chicago Tribune* headlined a brief story about the chapter's installation as "Legal Fraternity to Be Installed at Loyola" – perhaps an indication that the idea of women in law was still novel.

Hursen, the dean of the chapter, was quite prominent. By the time she graduated from Loyola, she was president of the Cook County Professional and Business Women's League and a member of the Board of Governors of the Illinois Club for Catholic Women; she was also singled out for mention in the 1924 yearbook (while still a student) as a candidate for Congressman-at-Large (a race that she lost). A former teacher, she became principal of a Chicago school while also practicing law. She stayed active in the sorority, later becoming its National Grand Dean.

Women had struggled for a long time to become lawyers in Illinois. In 1869 Myra Bradwell passed the Illinois bar examination but was denied admission to the bar because she was married and, at a later hearing, simply because she was a woman. (The Illinois Supreme Court, on its own motion, admitted her to practice in 1890, four years before her death.) Illinois boasted the first woman to graduate

from any law school when in 1870 Ada Miser Kepley graduated from Union College of Law (a predecessor of Northwestern); she too was denied admission to the bar, until 1881. The first woman admitted to practice in Illinois was Alta Hulett in 1871, on her 19th birthday.

Once women were allowed to enroll at Loyola, they seem to have participated rather fully in the life of the law school, at least so far as surviving records indicate. Women law students were often elected as class officers. It is likely, however, that the women students were treated differently from the men, both in class and outside of it, because of the novelty of their presence. In its first year of law school, the class that eventually graduated in 1930 could describe itself this way: “Male and female were represented, ... with a faculty universally male.”

Also in 1926, Alice O’Kane (now Alice McShane) was the first woman to receive a graduate degree, in the very first year of the law school’s new graduate program; in fact, she received a J.U.D. degree – the first and one of the few doctorate degrees ever awarded, the normal graduate degree being an LL.M. At least four other women would subsequently achieve graduate degrees in the short life of that program, including Edith S. Sampson, the first African American woman, in 1927.

In 1936, Evelyn McIntyre, together with her partner Ulysses Keys (an African American man), won the law school's intramural moot court competition, the Brandeis Competition. Another woman, Eva Charles, was on Loyola's winning intraschool team in 1939; her partner was William L. Lamey, who would later serve as the law school's dean from 1967 to 1970.

African American women made their first appearance during this time – Clarice Hatcher received her LL.B. in 1938. The first Hispanic and Asian American women would not graduate until several decades later.

It is difficult to ascertain how the women graduates of that era used their law degrees. Securing a position as a practicing lawyer was still very difficult for women at that time – and would remain so for decades to come. It was not until 1918 that women had even been allowed membership in the American Bar Association. Some women succeeded in practice quite well, however.

After practicing as a public defender, Katherine Nohelty ('37), became the first woman to be elected judge of the Municipal Court in Chicago. When she returned to the law school in 1958, however, it was to speak to the Law Wives Club – suggesting that, two decades after her graduation, men may still have been considered to be the “typical” law students.

Edna Devlin Bowens ('30, LL.M. '31) became the president of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois within a few years of her law school graduation; she began her own law practice. Another early Loyola graduate to serve as WBAI president was Mary Kelly ('27).

The ranks of women at the law school seem to have thinned as World War II approached and in the few war years that the school continued to operate after the U.S. entered the war. After the war, a few women joined the ranks of law students as the school reopened in 1946; most of the students, however, were men who were returning to complete their education and the careers that had been interrupted by wartime service.

Women students in the early postwar years included Mary Ann (Grohwin) McMorrow ('53), who would later become the first woman to serve as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Illinois.

As the 1970s dawned, changes in the role of women in society led to a remarkable increase in the number of women applying to law school nationwide. Loyola too experienced a dramatic increase in its student body, particularly women, which had the unfortunate consequence of emphasizing the school's increasingly inadequate facilities throughout that decade.

The significantly larger number of women and the era's focus on social justice led to conversations about sexism and feminism. Whatever the specifics at Loyola, one woman student, Roseann Oliver ('72), took to *Blackacre*, the new law student newspaper, to defend Loyola: "I am aware of charges made in other law schools regarding discrimination [against women].... However, these tactics have never been practiced by any member of our faculty. I think that every faculty member tries (in his or her own way) to teach us how to be competent attorneys."

When the law school's intraschool moot court competition was re-established in 1977, the first winners of that competition were two women: Patricia Kuehn ('78) and Elizabeth Pendzich ('78).

Women law students informally began an organization called the Committee on Women's Issues in the early 1970s, which continues to operate today as the Women's Law Society.

In 1977-78, women at the law school began to produce the *Women's Law Reporter*, a review of legal matters of particular concern to women, with Dorothy Lupton ('78) as its first editor-in-chief. That publication later went through changes that led to today's *Consumer Law Journal*.

Throughout the law school's modern era, women scored firsts. Some of those firsts were within the law school: Teree E. Foster ('76) was the first woman

to serve as editor-in-chief of the Loyola Law Review, and Kathy O'Dekirk ('81) was the first woman to serve as the president of the Student Bar Association.

A momentous occasion for women at Loyola was the hiring of Nina S. Appel to the full-time faculty in 1973 ; she was not the first woman on the faculty, but she was the first to stay there for the balance of her career – and she went on to become the first woman dean of the law school in 1983.

In recent decades, women have often constituted over half of the first-year class, and they continue to participate in and excel at all student endeavors. Loyola today can take pride in its achievement over the past 90 years of Siedenburg's vision of a law school that was open to all qualified applicants.

(An edited version of this article was published in the Winter 2016 issue of Loyola Law, the law alumni magazine of the School of Law of Loyola University Chicago.)