

A
CENTURY'S

JOURNEY

WOMEN AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT
SCHOOL OF LAW

Anne M. Hamilton '73

UConn
SCHOOL OF LAW

Anne M. Hamilton is a 1973 graduate of the University of Connecticut School of Law. She practiced law for 15 years before becoming a reporter and joining the staff of The Hartford Courant.

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Dedicated to J.P.M.



The Hartford College of Law	
Evening Classes For Men and Women	
College Opened October 25	
Enrollment Date Expires Nov. 1st.	
* * * *	
Telephone Charter 7893	
Schoolrooms 94 Allyn St.	Office 75 Pearl St.

The Hartford Courant, Oct. 30, 1921

The year 1921 saw the first advertisements for the new Hartford College of Law – advertisements that announced openings for both men and women. This was remarkable, given that women in the United States had only just gained the right to vote the previous year. Perhaps even more surprising was the report in *The Hartford Courant* on October 26, 1921, that seven of the “about 50” students who enrolled in the school’s first session were women. Significant attrition followed, and by the time that first class graduated three years later, in 1924, only one woman remained – J. Agnes Burns, the first female graduate of what would eventually become the University of Connecticut School of Law.

The century since the school’s opening has seen many changes. Back in the 1920s, applicants were required to have only a high



J. AGNES BURNS
 Thomas J. Meskill Law Library

school education. Most graduates were headed for jobs in insurance companies or in law offices where they would conduct research. Taking the bar exam or being admitted to practice required further education or apprenticeship. Today's students, in contrast, must survive a highly competitive admissions process. And when they graduate from UConn School of Law, they go on to jobs in federal and state government, nonprofit organizations, and law firms in Connecticut, New York, Boston and beyond. Some work in small firms; some teach; some open their own offices. Finally, where nearly all the students during the Hartford College of Law's first decades were white – and residents of Connecticut – today's students come

from diverse backgrounds and hail from around the country and the globe.

Perhaps the most significant difference, however, is a sea change in the place of women in the legal profession. A century ago, when the Hartford College of Law opened, women lawyers were a rarity – and a half-century later, in 1970, a mere 3 percent of the lawyers in the United States were women. Today that number has grown to 38 percent. Women now outnumber men in law school nationwide, and that gap is increasing. At UConn School of Law, women have made up at least half the student body since the mid-1980s, and currently comprise about 60 percent. And while women remain underrepresented at the highest levels of the profession, many have broken barriers to reach positions of prestige and authority.

Entry for women into the profession was not easily achieved in Connecticut, and the courageous pioneers who attempted it faced imposing obstacles. The story goes back nearly 150 years, to shortly after the Civil War, when Mary Hall, a mathematics teacher from Marlborough, southeast of Hartford, decided to follow her brother Ezra into the law. According to a 1984 retrospective in *The Hartford Courant*, Ezra Hall was reluctant to have his sister study law in his chambers – although reading law was a popular and approved method of becoming a lawyer in those days. To test her, Ezra gave her a difficult legal text to analyze, and when she performed well, he allowed her into his chambers.

Ezra's death a few months later nearly derailed Mary Hall's ambitions, but then John Hooker, a prominent Hartford lawyer known as an abolitionist and progressive, offered Mary a place in his own chambers. Four years later she applied for admission to the bar, attracting public attention. *The Courant* declared that "it would be a long step backwards to refuse [women's] admission to the bar [and]

would be regarded as a confession of fear on the part of the men.” Despite an alleged case of nerves, Hall passed the bar exam. But even then, acceptance was not automatic. Hall was required to take the additional step of petitioning the Connecticut Supreme Court for admission. In July 1882, the court upheld her right to be an attorney, and Mary Hall became the state’s first female lawyer.

Other women followed. Contemporaneous press reports and the state’s official Register and Manual identified Florence Clohessey as a lawyer in Waterbury in 1891 and Susannah C. O’Neill in Waterbury in 1905. Mary Selina Foote became a librarian at the New Haven County Bar Library – her career goals heralded in a 1911 *Courant* article listing candidates for the upcoming bar exam, its headline announcing that a “New Haven Woman Wants to Be a Lawyer.” These trailblazers faced myriad obstacles, from courts, bar associations and law firms, and from law schools themselves. Opposition to the very notion of women serving as lawyers was widespread. Harvard Law School, for example, did not admit women until 1950, even though women had been applying for admission since the 1870s. C.C. Langdell, Harvard’s legendary law school dean, asserted in 1899 that “the law is entirely unfit for the feminine mind – more so than any other subject.”

And so that small notice in *The Courant* in the fall of 1921, seeking “men and women” to enroll in the Hartford College of Law, represented a quietly transformative invitation. The overture, and the brand new school behind it, were the work of George and Caroline Lillard. A graduate of Georgetown Law School and an attorney at the Traveler’s Insurance Company – as well as a former FBI agent – George Lillard saw a need for trained employees in the rapidly expanding insurance business in Hartford. To meet this need, he and Caroline undertook to create not a post-college law school, but a kind of legal trade school, one that would offer evening classes for working people.



CAROLINE LILLARD
Ellen Cooper

It was not the first law school in Connecticut. The Litchfield Law School, regarded as the nation’s first independent law school, was founded in 1784, and 1826 saw the founding of Yale Law School, which had begun admitting women, in 1918. But Yale was expensive, elitist, and decidedly not a trade school. Although many lawyers looked down on the kind of preparation offered in a night school like the Hartford College of Law, the Lillards realized that Connecticut needed a nuts-and-bolts curriculum to train aspiring lawyers from modest backgrounds. Most of the early students needed to work while they were in school, and so for its first 14 years the college offered evening classes only.

Entrance requirements for the law college were modest by today's standards, and so were amenities. There was no law library, and classes – taught by local lawyers and judges – were held five nights a week in rented offices on Allyn Street in downtown Hartford. Tuition was \$100 a year, with three years required for a law certificate. The school progressed rapidly from these modest beginnings, and by the time it was accredited by the American Bar Association in 1933, Hartford College of Law students needed to have the equivalent of two years of college already under their belts and were required to attend law classes for four years. Meanwhile, its graduates were doing more than toil in local insurance companies. By 1942 their ranks included judges, vice presidents of insurance companies, a federal trial judge, a congressman, and a state Supreme Court justice. It was a level of professional success not yet accessible to women graduates. This too would change in years to come – slowly.

Although the college was ahead of its time in its openness to female students, their scarce number in its early decades was not surprising. Only about one of five American women worked outside the home during the early part of the 20th century, after all, and fewer still had professional degrees. By 1950, nearly a quarter century after the college opened, women made up only 3 percent of the country's lawyers, according to the American Bar Association – a figure that would not budge for the next 20 years.

Those women who did enter the profession were often treated as novelties. The careers of female Hartford Law graduates of the era who went on to become lawyers were highlighted in news articles – a not-so-subtle indication of the rarity of such choices. When J. Agnes Burns, who graduated with honors in that first class of 1924, went on to become the first woman to appear before the Connecticut Supreme Court, a newspaper account announced that her appearance in the courtroom exerted “no perceptible influence” on the five (male)

justices. The article went on to reassure readers that while Burns worked on the brief and “made suggestions,” she did not argue the case in court.

Agnes Burns' biography showcases the kind of life and career typical of the college's early women graduates. One of six children of Irish immigrants, she graduated from the Huntsinger Business College and clerked for Judge William F. Henney before entering Hartford College of Law. By the time she passed the bar exam in 1925, a year after graduating, she was already 38 years old. Seven years later she became one of the first women admitted to the Connecticut Bar Association. Burns went on to become active in Hartford Democratic politics, serving on the Charter Revision Commission that created the council-manager form of government, and was elected three times to the state House of Representatives. (“Woman Candidate for State Assembly” was the headline in *The Courant* when she first ran, in 1929.) Burns achieved local renown; news articles noted her service as Connecticut Chairwoman of the National Pro-Roosevelt Association of Women Lawyers in 1936 and her inclusion in *Who's Who of American Women* in 1937. Her groundbreaking career was followed closely by *The Courant*, which mentioned her in at least 120 articles, ending with her obituary in 1952.

Agnes Burns was just the first of several impressive trailblazers at Hartford College of Law. In the Class of 1926 she was followed by Frances Keen, who had previously worked as a stenographer in a Hartford lawyer's office, and whose next step after graduating garnered her a *Courant* headline: “Hartford Girl to take Bar Examination.” Another graduate whose career attracted public notice was Fannie Himmelstein '31. Her parents, Joseph and Gussie Himmelstein, had emigrated from Russia in the early years of the 20th century, and her father owned a butcher shop in Hartford. Fannie graduated from Hartford's Weaver High School and worked

as a stenographer at the law firm of Albrecht and Richman, where she became curious about the law and “why the men in the office knew what to do,” as her obituary decades later would recall. Answering another of the Lillards’ ads in *The Courant*, Himmelstein enrolled.

Her prior work at the law firm qualified her to take the bar exam, and when she passed it – the only woman to do so in Connecticut in 1934 – she embarked on a 50-year career in law. During her accomplished and varied career, she negotiated the merger of several synagogues into what became known as the United Synagogues. In 1946, she became the director of the Hartford Free Legal Aid Office, which represented lower-income clients, and remained there until 1953. She also worked for the town of West Hartford as an assistant corporation counsel. Himmelstein remained connected to the law school, serving as president of its alumni association, and her long association with the school gave her a unique perspective over its many decades of change. In an interview in 1981, four years before her death, Fannie recalled how the men in her law classes had treated her “like one of the boys,” even sharing dirty jokes. Not everyone took her seriously. “Some men thought women in law school was a cute idea,” she recalled – though years later, when she was practicing, her male colleagues accepted her. “They knew what I could do,” Fannie said with a smile. “Others had to find out.”



39 WOODLAND STREET
Thomas J. Dodd Research Center

Bit by bit, the status of the Hartford College of Law improved over the institution’s first decades. Recognized in 1933 by the American Bar Association, the school in the ensuing years hired its first full-time dean, increased the holdings in its library, raised admission standards and hired full-time staff. By 1940, the operation had moved from makeshift spaces in downtown Hartford to the Jacobus House, a Tudor mansion at 39 Woodland Street. Soon, lawyers educated at the college were making their way into positions at prominent law firms and insurance companies.

There were institutional ups and downs. World War II had a shattering effect on the school, with 1946 seeing a mere 29 students enrolled and a paltry graduating class of six. Some doubted the school would survive. As it turned out, that first postwar year proved to be the low point. Enrollment soon rebounded, an influx of returning veterans revitalizing the school. The turnaround received an incalculable boost when members of the college's Board of Trustees met with representatives of the University of Connecticut and hammered out a deal to lease the college to the university for five years in return for the university's financial support. In 1948, the school officially became the University of Connecticut School of Law, ushering in an era of growth in both status and influence. In the late 1950s, UConn bought land on Asylum Avenue in West Hartford for construction of a new law school building, and after many delays it opened in 1964.

Still, women remained a small minority, their numbers in the postwar 1950s and '60s growing with stubborn slowness. Female students encountered condescension from teachers and fellow students alike. Years later, Jeanette Carrozzella '56 would recall her admission interview with the legendary Professor William F. Starr. "He asked if I was going to law school because I was interested in finding a husband," she remembered. She promptly answered that she was there because of her love for the law. (The exchange proved ironic; her eventual first husband, Jack Carrozzella, was a year ahead of her in law school, and later in life she married William Moller, a Hartford attorney – and also a UConn Law graduate.) Ruth Trask Mantak '57 was one of just two women in her class when she started. She too faced a widespread belief among male students that she was there to find a husband. And while her professors were polite, she nonetheless felt challenged to justify her presence; "I always felt I had to prove myself," she recalled.

Mantak did prove herself, and in 1979 she co-founded Hartford's first all-women law firm, Mantak Christensen and Ruhe, specializing in divorce and family law. While she noted that men she encountered over the early years of her career could at times be "a little condescending," Mantak recalled being treated fairly in court. "If they ruled against me, it was because I didn't have a good enough argument." And she enjoyed a certain *esprit de combat* with the opposing counsel, most of them male. "Some were very ruthless, and we had some very good fights."

Sandra Pessin Gersten '60 was another successful practitioner. Her two older sisters had graduated from the school in the 1940s, and Gersten started in the evening division in the fall of 1957. Although slights against women were not prominent in her recollections of the school – if there had been any, she said, she would have ignored them – she did recall one professor with a crass habit of telling off-color jokes when he encountered a group of women. She and her women friends would turn their backs and walk away. After graduating, Gersten practiced law with her husband, Aaron, for several years until she opened her own office. As of 2022 she was still practicing – with her son.

As late as the fall of 1969, when Anne Dranginis entered law school, women comprised just 10 percent of the matriculating class. Some professors "were savage and singled us out," Dranginis recalls. Often in this era there were only two or three women in a class, sometimes even just one. And the challenges these women faced by no means ended when their law studies did. Graduating, they entered careers where they were routinely mistaken for secretaries, asked to make coffee, or questioned by court personnel if they took a seat in the area of the courtroom reserved for attorneys. Judges often opened court with a ritual greeting of "Good morning, gentlemen." Clients proved reluctant to consult a "lady lawyer," and firms reluctant to hire them.



CONNECTICUT LT. GOV. EUNICE GROARK '65

One female graduate remembered a senior partner at a prominent firm dismissing the idea of women advancing in the profession. “We hired *one*,” he explained, as if such tokenism was both sufficient and fitting.

Confronting these challenges, first as students and later as lawyers, women rarely complained, downplaying their difficulties. Asked if she had experienced gender discrimination in her career, former Connecticut Lt. Gov. Eunice Groark, a member of the Class of 1965, answered, “If so, I chose to ignore it.” Such stoicism reflected the tenor of the times. After the early 1960s, when Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* sold more than a million copies and helped discredit the myth of the happy homemaker, the feminist movement grew, and women began to enter professions in much larger numbers.



MARILYN SEICHTER '70
Thomas J. Meskill Law Library

Yet indignation over sexist treatment was far more muted than in subsequent decades. In the long era before both the law and changing cultural norms began to accept and protect women in the workplace, women tended to react to affronts cautiously. Fear of ridicule or retaliation stifled complaint.

Swimming against these still-powerful currents, women lawyers who trained at UConn did what they could. Some, graduating from law school and finding themselves spurned by law firms, turned to government jobs or the court system, where they found less discrimination. Others practiced with their lawyer husbands. A few had their own solo practices, like Marilyn Seichter '70, who went on to be the first woman president of the Connecticut Bar Association

and the first to head the Connecticut State Ethics Commission. Seichter was part of a team of lawyers who brought an abortion rights case against the state and – on behalf of the National Organization for Women – sued newspapers that ran separate help wanted ads for men and women.

For some women entering the school, gender and class combined to make the path forward harder still. Konstantina “Konnie” Bequary Lukes ’66 grew up in Waterbury, the daughter of Albanian immigrants. While working at her father’s restaurant, she met the city’s mayor; imagining herself someday similarly entering politics and running a city, she decided to go to law school. She received little support. “Everyone who was supposed to be a mentor tried to discourage me,” she said. But she prevailed and managed to enroll.

As a student with a job and a substantial commute, Lukes had little time to socialize with her fellow students, envying “the guys” who would go out drinking together, establishing camaraderie and networks from which she felt excluded. After graduation, she went to work in the Hartford Probate Court, but was put on leave upon becoming pregnant. “When I came back, guess what? The job wasn’t there.” For a time, Lukes worked for a small law firm in Meriden. After a male friend she had told about a job opening at the firm applied and got the job, Lukes learned that he was being paid twice what she earned. She angrily quit. She moved with her husband to Worcester, where she soon encountered a similar situation with another male colleague.

Rarely was she allowed to forget that women lawyers were viewed by many as second-class citizens. “There was always a little non-acceptance,” Lukes said. She recalled a long-ago day in court when the client she was representing, a man, showed up looking “scruffy and dirty.” Lukes herself was wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase

– yet the judge got their roles reversed. “I said, your Honor. *I’m* the lawyer. *This* is the client.” Another time a judge demanded to know her marital status when Lukes challenged a ruling. “The judge said, ‘Is it Miss Lukes or Mrs. Lukes?’ I said, ‘It is *Attorney* Lukes.’” Irritated, the judge denied Lukes’ objection. Lukes held her ground and subsequently sued the city, arguing that no state law required a woman to use her husband’s name. (She won the case.) Eventually founding her own firm, Lukes practiced law and went on to serve 15 terms on the Worcester city council – and one term as mayor, fulfilling the dream that had started it all.

Other graduates of the era addressed the hefty challenge of balancing career and family. When she started in the evening division at UConn Law, Brenda A. Draghi ’69 had a 1-year-old and a 6-week-old – and delivered her third child during the summer after her second year. “You had to learn how to cope,” she said decades later, recalling the toll taken by living two full-time lives at once: falling asleep at stoplights and relying on her seatmates to keep her awake during class, or propping up her law books on the ironing board. Draghi doubled up on classes and completed the evening curriculum, which was then usually undertaken as a five-year course of study, in four years. By the time her fourth child was born, Draghi was in practice with her lawyer husband, and was widely recognized in the Rockville judicial district. Still, at times she couldn’t tell if she was being addressed as an attorney or a wife. “Judges would say, ‘What case do you have, dear? What does Charlie think?’”

When Carol Agate entered UConn in 1971, she had already finished college 15 years earlier. Hoping to get into politics, and also eager not to be described as “just a housewife,” she started law school with great anticipation. But she soon encountered discrimination both subtle and not-so-subtle. Several professors used only male names in exam questions. A moot court instructor refused to let the only two women

in the group work together. During the entirety of her first year, not a single professor called on a woman unless her hand was raised. “Was he afraid they would burst into tears?” she wondered. When she applied for a summer job, Agate was turned down – and was told it was because she had two children. “Do you not hire *men* with two children?” she asked the interviewer.

The women who attended UConn in the '50s and '60s sometimes ended up taking non-traditional career paths. Lois V. Bromson '56 became a peace activist who demonstrated against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. Ann Lucille Matarese '58 practiced law in Hartford and served in the state House of Representatives until 1971, when she entered the Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut, and took the name Mary Immaculata – subsequently serving both as attorney for her abbey and also as subprioress.

Those who stayed within the system found their own ways to leave their marks. Eunice Strong Groark '65 married a classmate, Tom Groark, and became active in Hartford Republican politics. After serving on the Hartford City Council and as corporation counsel, she became the first woman elected lieutenant governor in Connecticut, joining Gov. Lowell Weicker on the A Connecticut Party ticket in 1990. Groark enjoyed a long and illustrious career in politics and public service, remaining active until her death at 80 in 2018. Taken together, these lives represented a march toward professional parity, led by resolute women who both individually and collectively presented a force to be reckoned with.

An influx of women into the UConn School of Law began in the 1970s and struck a series of institutional and cultural obstacles as their increasing numbers were not universally welcomed. “Suddenly there were enough women in the class where we were a threat.

We were competition – in classes and for jobs,” recalled Anne Dranginis '72. She and her peers felt insulted by the abiding suspicion that they were in school to find a husband – and the accusation that they might be taking a job from a male breadwinner. “It didn’t compute to men that maybe we would be in a position where we would have to support a family.” After going on to practice for years as an assistant state’s attorney, Dranginis was appointed to the Connecticut Superior Court, and later to the state’s Appellate Court. She is now in private practice.

In 1972, as the ranks of women at the law school continued to grow, students formed the UConn Law Women’s Association, welcoming male and female students, faculty and staff. No records have been found to identify the early officers of the new organization, but the law school’s archives contain a remarkable memo to the faculty attributed to “G.J. Stillson MacDonnell, UConn Law Women’s Association.” Stillson, a member of the Class of 1973, wrote that the organization had just completed a review of the final exams filed in the law library.

“Our review indicated that the exams reflect a world populated almost entirely by men. In client-fact situations men have been portrayed in such roles as: druggist, debtors, senator, D.A., gambler, tax attorney, architect, financier, jeweler, political organizer, law professor, and as law students, while women, in the available exams, [were] restricted to a woman law student who asked to have her finals postponed because of marital problems with her husband. Within our collections of other exams, the role of women has been similarly restricted to domestic models, prostitutes, a secretary, and fainting bystanders. The general rule seems to be that a female example is used only when the role or the character trait would not be suitable for a male figure. We would like to remind you that women are engaged in an ever-increasing variety of occupations, including the law, and



CONSTANCE BELTON GREEN '72
UConn School of Law, Steven Laschever

frequently seek legal advice for a broad variety of reasons. We would hope that in drafting this year's final exams and in the future you might consider utilizing women in as wide a variety of positions and situations as we are capable of fulfilling." The memo ended, drily, "We would also like to remind you that such a consideration should also be extended to your classroom hypotheticals."

MacDonnell went on to practice law in Hartford from 1974 to 1987, and to found the Hartford Rape Crisis Service. She also served as chair of the Coalition of Connecticut Organizations Concerned with Women's Issues and as an attorney for and a board member of the Connecticut Feminist Federal Credit Union in New Haven. In 1987 she moved to California, where she became a shareholder and chair of the Employment Taxes Practice Group at Littler Mendelson PC in San Francisco. She died in 2017.



BESSYE WARREN BENNETT '73
Dru Nadler

The era also saw important breakthroughs for Black women. In 1972, Constance Belton Green became the first Black female graduate of the law school. After graduation, Green earned a doctorate in education from Columbia University and served as a consultant with the state Department of Education and as chief diversity officer for Eastern Connecticut State University. She later wrote "Still We Rise: African Americans at the University of Connecticut School of Law," recounting her story and that of other Black students and faculty at the law school. Bessye Warren Bennett '73, a graduate of Radcliffe College, had turned down a place at Harvard Law School in order to be with her husband, who had a job in Connecticut. Bennett, who

had three children, skillfully combined marriage, motherhood and a career, and in 1974, became the first Black woman to be admitted to the Connecticut bar. A deputy town attorney with a private law practice in Bloomfield, she also worked as in-house counsel to the Society for Savings in Hartford and served on the board of Connecticut Natural Gas, before passing away in 2000.

Bennett and Green sat for an interview with the Connecticut Law Tribune in 1995 with another Black female UConn Law alumna, Patricia Lilly Harleston '74. As Green recounted in her book, the women talked about the dual challenges of racism and sexism. Bennett told the interviewer that the growing enrollment of minority and female students in the early 1970s almost seemed too much for the faculty and some students to assimilate. Bennett also remembered that some male students were allies. "There was one situation where for about two weeks in a row no women were called on in class," she said. "So finally one of the male students said to the professor, 'There are, you know, people other than men in this class, and we'd like to hear from our female students.'" The statement was met, she said, with shouts and applause.

During the 1970s, as those issues played out at the law school, women achieved some notable and very public breakthroughs in Connecticut. In 1974, voters elected Ella Grasso governor. She was not only the first woman to serve as Connecticut's governor, but the first woman elected governor of any state in her own right, not a figurehead succeeding her husband. In 1978, she appointed Yale Law Professor Ellen Ash Peters to the Connecticut Supreme Court, the first woman to serve on it. Grasso's successor, William A. O'Neill, appointed Peters chief justice, a position she held until her retirement in 1996. Peters, who had married Dean Phillip I. Blumberg in 1979, later became a visiting professor at UConn School of Law, where she taught a seminar on federalism.



CONNECTICUT GOV. ELLA GRASSO
*Office of History and Preservation, U.S.
House of Representatives*

By the mid-1970s, no longer feeling limited to such professions as teaching or nursing, American women were increasingly choosing law school as an entrée into a legal career in private practice, a corporation, nonprofit organization or government. Reflecting the challenges of breaking into male-dominated fields, the Women's Law Association began bringing women lawyers to campus to speak about their careers. The October 3, 1973, edition of a student newspaper, the *Legal Realist*, included a notice that Marilyn Seichter, who had graduated in 1970, would return to campus to talk about her advocacy for women's reproductive and employment rights. The next month, Sonia Pressman Fuentes, one of the first women attorneys to work for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission,



THE HON. ELLEN ASH PETERS
Thomas J. Meskill Law Library

spoke about the changing roles of women and men in professional life.

The guidance was important. Susan Hoffnagle '73 had applied to UConn without a clear idea of where a law school education might lead. Her grades at UConn Law were good, and she won a spot on the *Connecticut Law Review*, but much to her chagrin, none of that seemed to matter when she went job hunting. During an interview at a large Hartford law firm, the partner conducting the interview mentioned that the firm was reluctant to hire women. "They have a tendency to go out and *foal*," he declared. Though Hoffnagle thought his remark crude, she bit her tongue. She balked at complaining,

worrying that a letter to the firm could lead to a general blackballing. Eventually Hoffnagle went to work for the Hartford firm of Ribicoff and Kotkin. It was a good position, but the difficulties she faced as a woman persisted. One time she found herself in New Haven with other members of the firm when court adjourned for lunch. The partner supervising the case suggested going to the Q Club, the storied private club founded originally for Yale graduates – whereupon Hoffnagle had to remind him that the club did not allow women. The lawyers ended up eating hotdogs on the sidewalk. Now retired after a career at Cigna, where she rose to be chief investment counsel, Hoffnagle has never forgotten the climate of 50 years ago, when she was asked to run for editor-in-chief of the law review but stepped aside, deferring to a classmate who, she recalled, "was like the epitome of an editor: tall, white, male." The classmate was well qualified, but Hoffnagle knew she herself could have done the job just as well. Yet she deferred, almost automatically. "It was the stupidest thing. I thought that you have to be a tall white male to do that job."

While the proportion of female students continued to climb through the 1970s, progress in the faculty ranks lagged. Indeed, over the entire first three decades of the school's existence, the number of female professors had been precisely zero. That changed when Shirley Raissi Bysiewicz, who had graduated from UConn Law in 1954, was hired as its head librarian. The future mother of Connecticut Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, Shirley had been turned down by law firms after she graduated and had started work as a prosecutor. But UConn reached out and offered her a position. After earning a degree in library science, she joined the law school as its first full-time female faculty member in 1956, becoming its first tenured woman in 1972. In addition to her library responsibilities, Bysiewicz taught courses on Women and the Law, legal research and writing, elder law, and gender discrimination. Beyond the campus, she became a founder and vice president of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund



PROFESSOR SHIRLEY RAISSI BYSIEWICZ '54
Thomas J. Meskill Law Library

and the first woman to hold an elected position in the Connecticut Bar Association, serving as treasurer. As her 1990 obituary stated, “She paved the way in many arenas, combining motherhood and career successfully.”

Over the years, Bysiewicz was joined by several women who worked as adjunct professors. Clare Dalton taught legal research and writing for a year and subsequently taught at Harvard Law School – ultimately suing that school successfully for a gender-based denial of tenure. The list of other UConn graduates who returned to teach as adjuncts includes Wendy Susco '71, the first woman editor-in-chief of the *Connecticut Law Review* and later Superior Court judge, as well as Emily Lebovitz, Nancy DuBois Wright, Marjorie Gelb and Susan Peck.

But it took two full decades for Shirley Bysiewicz to be joined by another tenured female faculty member. When Carol Weisbrod,



THE HON. WENDY W. SUSCO '71
UConn School of Law

a Columbia law school graduate, applied for a faculty position in 1977, it was a propitious moment to do so. “They were looking for women,” she recalled, noting the need to fill places opened up by an increasingly rapid turnover among faculty. In earlier years, UConn law faculty had “stayed forever;” but by the time Weisbrod interviewed for a job, UConn had become a “feeder school” – one, that is, where some professors spent a few years before moving to more selective schools. In response, Dean Phillip I. Blumberg had an ambitious program to elevate the school’s status. “He wanted our peer to be Harvard,” Weisbrod said.

Blumberg sought to hire excellent teachers and scholars who would stay, and in Weisbrod he recognized many pluses: her husband taught

at Yale, so she was unlikely to move; she already had children (no maternity leave issues); and she came with experience teaching at other law schools and a good recommendation from Yale. Despite her lack of an academic publishing record, Blumberg saw in her “a risk worth taking,” Weisbrod said. Thus did she become the second tenured female faculty member more than 50 years after the school was founded.

For UConn the risk paid off, as Weisbrod amply fulfilled Blumberg’s vision of faculty members who would burnish the school’s profile. During her 35 years at the law school, Weisbrod wrote five books, co-authored a family law casebook, and published many articles in the fields of legal history, family law and political theory. She taught classes in U.S. Law and Legal Institutions and Family Law and retired in 2012 as the Ellen Ash Peters Professor of Law.



UConn LAW BUILDING ON
ASYLUM AVENUE IN WEST HARTFORD
UConn School of Law

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw real growth for women in American law schools. By 1977, according to a report in the *Pocket Part* student newspaper, 48 percent of the incoming class at UConn School of Law was female. After Weisbrod’s hiring, the number of women faculty slowly increased. In 1983, Paula Bonds became the first Black female faculty member, leaving after two years to be a staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union. Enrollment rose overall, and the school quickly outgrew the West Hartford building. In 1980 the Connecticut legislature authorized the purchase of the 20-acre Hartford Seminary property in the West End of Hartford for a new law school campus. Classes opened on the seminary’s former campus in 1984, and the school flourished.



STARR HALL ON THE UCONN LAW CAMPUS IN HARTFORD
UConn School of Law

The enrollment of a cohort of pregnant women, starting in the mid-70s, resulted in many changes that made life less difficult for them and for other women as well. Josephine Marchetti '78 already had four children when she decided to go to law school. She was a decade out of college, needed a job, and was fortunate to have both a supportive husband and an "angel" babysitter. At UConn she found solidarity with the other mothers, sharing class notes, forming study groups and trading off children. Classmates and faculty got used to seeing her children around the school.

"We were the very first wave of 'There's a bunch of us now,' and maybe it was a bit easier for us," said Marchetti, whose subsequent long career included a stint as assistant general counsel at Cigna. She had gotten to know Dean Blumberg, who was "intrigued by my

situation," she recalls. During Marchetti's second year, when she was expecting her fifth child, Blumberg changed the previously inflexible rule that separated day students from evening ones, allowing her to take classes during the day – a huge improvement for Marchetti, who no longer had to leave home at dinner time to attend classes. Such accommodations were becoming the new normal, in ways that prior generations of women could only have dreamed of. On one occasion when Marchetti was taking a make-or-break criminal law exam and her baby needed nursing, her professor let her take the exam in a faculty break room – her husband bringing the baby at feeding time. "I really did have a unique experience in many ways. I felt like I was treated extremely well, like they went overboard." But progress was uneven, the faculty was still overwhelmingly male and not all women received such treatment. Linda Rickard '78 recalls that when she was expecting her first child and had an exam scheduled for the evening, she asked the professor if she could take the test earlier in the day – it was her first trimester, she explained, and she was exhausted by nighttime. The professor disdainfully refused. "He said, 'Why don't you just take a D and be done with it?'" Rickard recalled. So she took the exam as scheduled, in the evening – and received the highest grade. "He came down the hall to congratulate me, and I turned away."

In February 1977, the Law Women's Association organized the New England Regional Conference on Women and the Law, held at the law school over a weekend with a keynote address at the Hotel Sonesta in Hartford. The speaker was a Columbia law professor known for her advocacy on women's issues, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who would return to visit UConn Law 27 years later as a sitting U.S. Supreme Court justice. More than 30 workshops addressed issues including Title IX, maternity benefits and women in prison. Emily Jane Goodman, author of "Women, Money and Power," led a workshop on starting a legal practice.



FROM LEFT, DEAN NELL JESSUP NEWTON, SUPREME COURT JUSTICE RUTH BADER GINSBURG, FORMER CONNECTICUT SUPREME COURT CHIEF JUSTICE ELLEN ASH PETERS AND PROFESSOR CAROL WEISBROD AT UCONN SCHOOL OF LAW IN 2004.
University of Connecticut, Peter Morenus

The conference drew the attention of *The Hartford Courant*, whose reporter attended the informal panel discussion “Daily Life as a Woman Law Student.” The article described some of the questions raised in the session, including how women students should react to a course book that recommended hiring legal secretaries according to bust size.

The question of how to deal with sexist classroom jokes “on subjects such as rape” elicited a split response. One panelist endorsed the practice of hissing as an “unidentifiable and effective” sign of disapproval, but another worried that hissing “alienates possible allies.” Participants complained about professors who never called on women in class, or perhaps worse questioned women “only on legal subjects dealing with women, such as prostitution and abortion.” The

question of how to dress drew a weary consensus: “If you wear pants you have a better chance of losing in moot court, but if you dress too feminine you will not be taken seriously.”

The Law Women’s Association continued to sponsor events about sex discrimination, legal careers and other issues through the 70s and 80s, as it still does today. Its members organized partnership projects, offering students the chance to help organizations that assisted victims of domestic violence and worked with incarcerated women. By November 1982, when preparations were underway to move the law school to the former Hartford Seminary campus, an update from the Law Women’s Association in the Pocket Part reported that “a committee is forming to investigate child-care facilities and alternatives at the new law school.” That initiative did not succeed. A year later, an update reported that the association “regrettably, has decided that it lacks the resources and student input to get a center started.”

Progress continued on other fronts in the 1970s and 80s. It wasn’t always smooth sailing, but numbers made a difference, and women felt a growing level of acceptance at the law school. They began to expect, or at least hope for, equal treatment. And they felt more room to excel academically. Meg Curran ’83 and Ilona Crosswhite ’83 were editors of the Connecticut Law Review and top scholars. Dean Blumberg would seek out Crosswhite to talk, and Justice Peters, who had attended the same high school in New York, would also stop and chat.

Crosswhite joined an all-female study group that booted out someone who was slacking off. “We were serious about our work and wanted to succeed,” she recalled. For her part, Curran said she “loved law school, everything about it,” recalling with relish the experience of learning how to “think like a lawyer.” Curran had two clerkships after

law school, then moved to Rhode Island where she was named U.S. Attorney in 1998. “My experience was that I wasn’t treated differently because I was a female,” she said. “Maybe I just didn’t notice it.”

Mary O’Connor ’87 was the first in her family to graduate from college. As an undergraduate she had attended UConn, where her interest in law was dampened by a college advisor who bluntly told her that “women’s brains aren’t wired for law school.” O’Connor worked for seven years before deciding to ignore his advice and apply to UConn Law. Frances Caliafore ’84 was already working in the court system when she started law school in the Evening Division. As a member of the first graduating class of women at the formerly all-male Williams College, Caliafore recalls being “very sensitized” to women’s issues. Law school was more of the same. Women there, she recalled, were intensely focused on how to be successful in a profession that was centered around men. “You were going to deal with a lot of men in this profession, and that’s just the way it was,” she said. Women in law school felt that their challenges were greater than those of their male colleagues. “I felt that society still had a long way to go.”

Hope Seeley ’89, now a judge of the Connecticut Appellate Court, grew up fascinated by criminal law, going back to a moot court trial she participated in while in elementary school. She knew that many lawyers had disdain for public defenders, and that some had trouble envisioning women in the role – she would later recall a professor commenting that he “couldn’t imagine” why “such a nice woman” would want to become one – yet she was undeterred. She found the law school to be very egalitarian, especially the Criminal Law Clinic, and said she “wasn’t aware of sexism,” either on the part of faculty or students.

Beyond law school, in the workplace, women remained outnumbered and disadvantaged. Job interviews could be particularly tough. When Josephine Marchetti applied for a clerkship at the Appellate Court, the Supreme Court justice interviewing her asked how she would manage with five children. “The same way you take care of yours,” she responded. During an interview at a large Hartford firm, a partner expressed concern about whether Marchetti would be able to manage the challenges of a litigation practice. “You have to be able to do many things at one time,” he warned. Marchetti reassured him that women with children and professions were well accustomed to juggling. “I am the princess of doing many things at one time,” she said.

When Linda Rickard went job hunting, she quickly realized that law firms were making few concessions to working mothers. “You were expected to be there Saturday morning,” she remembers. Turning down an offer from a law firm, she went to work at Aetna, where she could work part-time and the hours were regular. She specialized in tax law and remained at Aetna for her entire career.

In their careers, women had to learn to deal with casual slights. After a federal District Court clerkship, Susan Peck ’77 went on to private practice, developing expertise in civil rights law – and also in dealing with the men who were her opposing counsel. “As a defense mechanism, I accepted that men were always going to underestimate me,” she said. Peck decided to use that underestimation tactically, in the manner perfected by the seemingly fumbling detective played by Peter Falk in the popular 1970s television show, *Columbo*. “I would act as though I knew nothing,” Peck recalled. “I would get away with asking a lot of questions that would disarm people, and they would chitchat with me.” After years in private practice in Hartford, Peck was appointed a judge of the Connecticut Superior Court in 1996.



PROFESSOR AND FORMER INTERIM DEAN
WILLAJEANNE McLEAN
UConn School of Law

Anne F. Mahoney '87 had long wanted to be a prosecutor and went on to a career first as a military lawyer and later as a prosecutor in Windham, where she serves as state's attorney. By the time Mahoney attended UConn Law, the school was pretty evenly divided between men and women students. Not everyone was pleased. Mahoney recalls hearing that a professor had called another woman student aside to tell her, "You are taking a male's place." It was appalling, Mahoney said. "I couldn't believe it. But who would you tell?"

Even as the number of female students surpassed the number of men in the 1980s, the law school still had woefully few female professors. Willajeanne McLean was among the first. She joined the faculty in 1991 as a professor of intellectual property and European law and



FORMER DEAN NELL JESSUP NEWTON
UConn School of Law

served as interim dean in 2012 and 2013. She recalled the law school at the time of her hiring as "a remarkably collegial place" where people helped each other out. Still, McLean, who is Black, notes with concern that the legal profession remains very white, even as the larger society has become more and more diverse. "The law school should look like the rest of the United States," she said, "and we are not there yet."

The year 2000 saw the hiring of Nell Jessup Newton, who served as the school's first female dean and took on the daunting task of upgrading the handsome Collegiate Gothic buildings at the former Hartford Seminary site. Newton, who would go on to law school deanships at Notre Dame, Miami and Wake Forest, praised UConn's warm and welcoming climate and sense of community. "Women felt good about their law school experience there," she said. "The culture



FORMER ASSISTANT DEAN KAREN DEMEOLOA
UConn School of Law, Steven Laschever

in Connecticut is highly educated and not threatened by smart women as in other places.”

In 2020, Eboni S. Nelson became the law school’s third female dean, and the first Black person appointed to the position on a non-interim basis. She has made diversity, equity and belonging a priority. In 2022, she appointed Karen DeMeola ’96 the law school’s first assistant dean for diversity, belonging and community engagement. DeMeola returned to UConn Law four years after graduating to become assistant dean of admissions, and served in several leadership positions while she became the first person of color to serve as president of the Connecticut Bar Association. In 2023, she was appointed a judge of the state Superior Court.



DEAN EBONI S. NELSTON
UConn School of Law, Spencer Sloan

DeMeola approvingly noted changes in the school since the years when she was a student. Students today are “more diverse, aware of systemic inequities and racism,” she observed, and are “invested in social justice.” Classroom practices and priorities, however, sometimes lag. More emphasis could be placed on examining the structural racism and misogyny present in the subject matter, specific cases, or the legal system more broadly, DeMeola said.



THE HON. ANNE DRANGINIS
UConn School of Law, Steven Laschever

It seems a safe bet that if George Lillard could see his law school today, a century after its founding, he would scarcely recognize it. One thing that might stand out is the portrait of his wife, Caroline Lillard, which was added to the walls of the Reading Room in William F. Starr Hall in 2019. The portrait offered belated recognition of her contribution to the founding and operation of the law school, where she served as an administrator and librarian. Much else has changed. The core subjects of Contracts, Torts, Criminal Law and Property are still required, but instead of one standard curriculum followed by all, students choose from dozens of electives. Students today have the choice of spending a semester at one of a dozen law schools abroad, or working and studying for a semester in Washington, D.C. Forty-eight full-time faculty members and dozens of adjunct and affiliated professors teach more than 160

classes each year and supervise seven in-house clinical education programs ranging from criminal defense to animal law. The ratio of female to male faculty members has been about even for several years. Twenty-first century law students also differ greatly from those of a century ago. They are more professionally oriented, better educated, more worldly – and far more diverse. About 30 percent of today's students came from racial or ethnic identities that are underrepresented in the profession, and a significant number are the first in their families to pursue a college or a graduate degree. While this last group represents a demographic continuity with the Lillards' original college, today's law school is guided by a recognition that students with similar academic preparations may not have the same social or cultural background as their wealthier classmates.

About 40 student clubs and organizations enrich campus life, including 15 affinity groups aligned with racial, ethnic, religious and other identities. The women's organization established in 1972, now called the Women Law Students Association, is among the oldest and most active. A variety of internships and a robust alumni network assist students in the challenge of launching a career.

True parity is still a distant goal, but there has been undeniable progress. Today women make up more than a third of all lawyers in the United States, and where a century ago there was not a single female federal judge in the whole country, today 30 percent of all federal judges are women, as are more than one-third of all state supreme court justices. In Connecticut at the start of 2023, six of the 10 judges of the Connecticut Appellate Court were women, and three of the eight Connecticut Supreme Court justices. Many of these high achievers are graduates of the University of Connecticut School of Law. Vanessa Bryant '76, the first Black woman appointed to the federal bench in New England, is a UConn Law graduate. She and Kara Dooley '88 serve as judges in the District of Connecticut,

where two other UConn Law alumnae, Joan Margolis '78 and Donna F. Martinez '78, recently retired as magistrate judges. And although gender parity among the senior partnerships of large law firms or corporate legal departments remains elusive, women are increasingly – if slowly – rising to the top of office letterheads.

These numbers and the increase of women in the profession reflect an ongoing evolution in attitudes and practices, in law firms as well as in law schools. Yet sexist slights still occur; women continue to bear the onus of juggling pregnancy, parenthood, and profession, and many in male-dominated job situations can still see the shimmer of a glass ceiling when they look up. The sexist comments, harassment, and inappropriate touches that women once routinely endured have not been eradicated, but the #MeToo movement has made such conduct more likely to be punished. No law school dean today could ask whether a female applicant was searching for a partner, at least not without serious repercussions. Many professors now use gender-neutral or both male and female names in their exam questions and classroom hypotheticals. And women frequently take top academic honors and clerkships.

Some issues continue to rankle law school students, such as professors who are insensitive to transgender or gender-fluid students and call everyone either Mr. or Ms. without asking, or male students who bait women during discussions of abortion rights or domestic violence – sometimes without mediation by the professor. But the climate has shifted. Students of half a century ago saw little advantage in complaining about sexist or disparate treatment. With no laws or school rules to prohibit discrimination, there was little recourse. Today's students are more attuned to discriminatory language and practices and will find more support if they refuse to tolerate it.

For the most part, a greater sense of equality prevails. “I don't think [men] thought of me any differently,” said Valerie Ferdon '15. “My friends were a nice mix of men and women. I felt like I was on the same playing field.” Katherine Peccerillo '16, who entered law school to fight for the rights of disadvantaged people and now works in the legal department of Save the Children Federation, reports that “gender and sex didn't seem to be factors” in how UConn students were treated. “It felt very equal.” Female graduates of the past decade report less overt sexist behavior than their predecessors – although they still encounter a fair amount of male braggadocio, which can provoke annoyance. “They hogged conversations as much as they could,” said Aigné Goldsby '16 of some of her male classmates. “I felt like they felt they had to talk.”

All progress notwithstanding, many women today do not see the employment playing field as level. When looking at job postings, Megan DeFrank '21 was stunned to encounter firms with 50 male lawyers and only one or two women. “It does deter me from entering a place like that,” she said. “It's kind of shocking.” Yet however grudgingly, entry to boardrooms and partnership positions has been opening up, and increasingly the question that women ask themselves has changed from “Will we be promoted?” to “How can we make promotion work for us?” It is easier these days for women to move in and out of the workforce than it used to be. While still difficult in the legal profession, it is increasingly possible to take some time off for children and return – and do so with more options than 20 years ago, including flextime and telecommuting. Women continue to lobby for better and more affordable daycare, and for increased participation by their spouses with childcare and housework. In job interviews, the subject of maternity leave is no longer taboo.

Still, there are limits to the way jobs have evolved since women entered law in large numbers. Yes, more women are becoming equity partners, but not at the rate at which they currently enter the profession. The work-life balance remains a challenge. Ree Morrow '22, former president of the Women Law Students Association, said that a primary concern of many women graduates is how to coordinate a pregnancy with a career. They continue to hear warnings from older peers to defer babies until partnership is achieved, and to be wary of part-time work. "Your hours are cut in half, but you are still expected to produce as much work as if you were full time," Morrow said. Is the glass half-full or half-empty? Regarding that question, the jury – to invoke an apt metaphor – is still out. "It's sad that given how long it has been, not as much has changed as we would have hoped," said UConn Law Professor Leslie Levin, who studies the legal profession.

Across the United States, meanwhile, the variety of jobs in which a law degree can be advantageous keeps expanding, and as a result, law school graduates enjoy a broader range of employment opportunities than ever before. The increasing complexity of 21st century life means that there will continue to be a strong demand for lawyers, including the female graduates of the University of Connecticut School of Law. "A woman can be anything," said Morrow, who is looking forward to a law career with a nonprofit arts organization or museum. "In 50 years, you can see how far we've come."

One can almost hear generations of women's voices in unison, saying, *Amen to that.*



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