

Laurie McCallum: Grateful Trailblazer

Laurie McCallum's long and influential career in the law rests on a bedrock value: Treat everyone you encounter in your practice with respect and professionalism.

BY SHANNON GREEN

Laurie Riach McCallum entered law school 50 years ago, a time when few women were lawyers, and in her career has had a significant effect on employment law in Wisconsin.

McCallum, who lives in Lodi, is perhaps best known as the wife of former state senator and Wisconsin Gov. Scott McCallum (2001-03). But that fact should be considered a sidenote in a long and trailblazing legal career.

A Mining Community's Vision

McCallum's life started in Virginia, Minn., a mining town in the northern part of the state on the Mesabi Iron Range, a rich vein of iron ore mined in open pits. Virginia's iron provided for 80% of the steel used in World War II. The town, McCallum said, is "the Queen City of the Iron Range."

Laurie Riach McCallum was born in 1950 and, for several years, lived with her parents and a brother, 12 years older, in a small garage apartment above a plumbing business. Her father was a mine laborer on the swing shift. When she was three, her father contracted tuberculosis and was hospitalized for nine months. During this time, to make ends meet, her brother, then age 15, went to work as a golf caddy and her mom as a retail clerk. "They took turns watching me," she said.

Fortunately, her father recovered and eventually was promoted to foreman, and the family moved into their own house in 1956. Their experiences "made us very appreciative of those relatively better times and proud of our family's resilience and work ethic," McCallum said.

The town was filled with immigrants who worked in the mine, so while Virginia was isolated, its residents spoke many different languages. "I felt very blessed – everyone took care of each other," she said.

"They wanted their children to become successful Americans," she said, and town

residents offered their children a good education. "We had the most beautiful schools, the most current equipment and curriculum, and the best teachers. I am so grateful for the foresight of these hard-working Rangers who made my academic success and career possible."

"My hometown not only gave me a great education and great survival skills, but the desire to take that education and those skills and put them to work for others," she said.

When 'How Cute' Is a Motivation for Law School

McCallum attended Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minn., for her first year in college and met



Laurie McCallum. Photo: Tatiana Shirasaki/Tati Photo

her future husband, Scott McCallum. When her father's illness prompted her to join him in Arizona, she transferred to the University of Arizona, graduating with a degree in psychology in 1972. She began a graduate school program but realized the field of psychology "was not my life's calling" and left after one year.

Then she got a job as a secretary ("also not my life's calling") at the Tucson Chamber of Commerce. The environment "was the most misogynistic environment I had yet experienced." She witnessed a well-qualified woman passed over for an executive position because, she was told, "those jobs are not for women." Her boss would tell her to do trivial things – like retrieving files that were well within his seated reach. "It was very humbling," she said.

She knew she needed more education. "I sat down with the University of Arizona class catalog," looking for a graduate program she could enter without taking additional undergraduate courses – and found law school. "It would give me an opportunity to help people like those working-class people I grew up with on the Range," she said.

She studied for the LSAT on her lunch breaks, drawing the attention of the men in her office. "I could hear them make fun of me: 'How cute – she thinks she can become a lawyer.'" Their ridicule "just made me more determined."

Accepted by three schools, she chose Southern Methodist University in Dallas because of the financial aid.

And she still relishes the memory of leaving her secretarial position. "It was very enjoyable when I told them I was resigning to go to law school."

'We'd Laugh about It and Get Tougher'

Women comprised less than 20% of the enrollment at McCallum's law school. "I can remember only one or two women instructors," she said. "We kept our heads down and every time someone said something sexist, we'd

laugh about it and get tougher. We got used to it and didn't let it make us go off course." The experience of needing to "get tougher," she said, served her well in her later career.

After graduation, McCallum moved to Madison, where Scott McCallum was living and working. The Wisconsin bar exam was "a quite traumatizing experience."

As a new lawyer, "most of the men I worked with, including Scott, were encouraging and supportive."

Others were not. After a few months working as a new attorney on the health team project in the Office of the Commissioner of Insurance, the consumer attorney resigned. "The insurance commissioner assigned me to that position on a temporary basis," handling complaints against insurance agents. One day, when her assistant explained to an insurance agent that he would have to meet with McCallum, "he told my assistant that he would not talk to a woman and wanted to 'meet with a real lawyer.'"

Her favorite story occurred when she was commissioner and chair of the State Personnel Commission. On the day of one hearing, she was standing in the reception area speaking to an assistant when a man rushed into the office and thrust at her a pile of papers. "He rudely told me I needed to make copies of his exhibits for the hearing," she said. When she told him it is the party's responsibility to prepare copies before the hearing, "I asked why he hadn't done that. He gave me a condescending look and said he'd been busy." Then he laughed at her and "gave me a dirty look" when she told him that in the future, he should have copies done before arriving for a hearing. "Imagine his surprise and the look on his face, when I later walked into the room, took a seat on the raised dais, and introduced myself not only as the hearing officer for the case but as one of the commissioners who would make the final decision in his case."

'She Is My Lawyer!'

Governor Lee Dreyfus was "one of the greatest people [I've] ever known," McCallum said, and she holds many fond memories of the years she worked for him as assistant legal counsel. That includes an encounter while Dreyfus and McCallum were traveling together, when a man came up to Dreyfus and asked if McCallum was his daughter. The governor answered "'Daughter? No – she is my lawyer!' It is a great story," she said with a laugh.

Apparently, Dreyfus had a hard time keeping certain secrets. On June 19, 1979, Laurie and Scott McCallum, then a state senator, got married in secret. It was an elopement of sorts in Appleton while they were on a fundraising trip for a senator who was a close friend. The McCallums were wed immediately before the fundraiser event, at the friend's house. A judge – a former state senator – presided in a ceremony that included a few Polaroid photos. Returning to Madison, Scott McCallum quietly told the governor about the wedding. "But don't tell everybody," he said to Dreyfus, because they hadn't even told their families yet. Instead, Dreyfus "runs into the 'bull pen'" where McCallum sat at her desk – with reporters nearby – "and points to me and says 'Mrs. McCallum!'" she said. "So, our marriage went out as an AP wire story."

When Scott McCallum became governor in 2001, Laurie decided to keep working full time – not the usual choice for a governor's spouse at the time. There was pushback by some, but "Scott was very supportive," she said. "I did not want to give up the career I had worked so hard to attain, or to show my daughter that women should give up their own career to serve their husband's."

Giving the Final Words on Statutory Interpretation

McCallum spent more than 29 years practicing in administrative law. "I really loved my career," McCallum said.

She was commissioner at the State Personnel Commission (1982-2002) and then worked at the Labor and Industry Review Commission (LIRC) as a staff attorney (2003-11) and commissioner (2011-19). She was appointed to the commissioner positions by Republican and Democratic governors and “unanimously confirmed” by the State Senate each time.

McCallum helped develop laws in Wisconsin on equal rights, public accommodations, employment actions affecting state employees, unemployment insurance, and worker’s compensation. “Our review of the administrative law judges’ decisions [was] de novo. In contrast, a court to which one of the commission’s decisions was appealed was generally required to adopt the commission’s findings of fact and to provide a level of deference to its conclusions of law. As a consequence, the commission’s decisions were often the final word on the interpretation of statutory language,” she said.

The work was “really exciting.” It included interpreting laws about whistleblower retaliation, Wisconsin’s family and medical leave act, and sexual harassment. She was the LIRC in-house expert on employee and independent-contractor classification issues in unemployment insurance cases.

“We were tasked with interpreting a lot of new law,” she said. “I enjoyed the process of analyzing facts, applying the law, and writing decisions,” she said. “I decided tens of thousands of cases over almost 30 years,” always keeping in mind that “each individual case is important to someone, affecting their life in a significant way.”

She was also aware during her career of the assumptions people make when someone is identified with a particular political party, whether Democrat or Republican, that “you will have certain biases and will predictably vote a certain way on employment issues,” she said. “I did not accept these assumptions and instead focused on deciding each case on its own merits.

New Historical Timeline Chronicles Pivotal Moments of Wisconsin Women in the Law

Women make their mark on Wisconsin’s legal landscape in many ways. To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the first woman admitted to practice in Rock County, Wis., on June 17, 1874, the Wisconsin State Law Library has created a digital timeline that chronicles the achievements, challenges, and pivotal moments of women who have shaped Wisconsin’s legal landscape.

From trailblazing attorneys and judges to activists and legislators, these women have made significant contributions to advancing justice and equality. Browse historical events and biographies to learn more about women who have made an impact on Wisconsin.

For a personal window into history, the timeline includes photographs and scans from the attorney roll books, which attorneys sign upon admittance to the practice of law, said Carol Hassler, access services librarian at the State Law Library. “These treasured books, which date back to 1848, capture Lavinia Goodell’s signature upon her admission to practice law before the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1879. Follow links throughout the timeline to learn more about the individuals and events featured.”

Access the timeline at <https://wilawlibrary.gov/topics/legalprof/wiwomenlaw.html>.

To Learn More

A variety of activities planned this year celebrate the significant contributions women have made to Wisconsin’s legal history and their efforts to overcome challenges to full participation within the profession. The telling of stories of women in the law – including this series of



women history makers – ensures that women are written into Wisconsin’s legal history.

Gov. Tony Evers proclaimed June 17, 2024, as Wisconsin Women Lawyers Day. His proclamation praises Goodell for pioneering a path for women in the legal profession across the state and for facing the many obstacles thrown in her path with unwavering resilience. It recognizes the lasting impact of women lawyers on the fabric of the state’s legal system and emphasizes the importance of continuing to support and promote the advancement of women in the legal profession.

Share your own histories and stories of the women in your offices and within your local bar associations and community with the public, clients, and local media.

To learn more about the celebration of 150 years in the law, contact Mary E. Burke at WisWomenLaw@gmail.com. To learn more about the private life and public trials of Lavinia Goodell and Governor Evers’ proclamation, visit laviniagoodell.com. **WL**

Joyce Hastings and **Mary E. Burke** are coordinating this series of woman history makers and women to watch in celebration of the 150th anniversary of women in the law in 2024.

WOMEN HISTORY MAKERS

“That sent a signal as well that I was fair,” she said. “It was validating to learn from legislators, both Democrat and Republican, who were a part of the process for my Senate confirmations, that this was the reputation that I had acquired. When I was reappointed by (Democratic) Governor Tony Earl (1983-87), that was a big thing.”

‘We Were Just Trying to Figure Out How to Survive’

McCallum’s advice to women who are new lawyers: Don’t be afraid to try out a few practice areas to find the one compatible with your life circumstances. Also, “treat everyone you encounter in your practice with respect and professionalism. You never know when you will encounter people again in your life and what position they may be in to help or hurt you.”

One more bit of advice: “Step back on occasion and simply appreciate your life. How lucky we are to have this amazing

opportunity to engage in a respected profession and to develop and exercise our intellects to help solve the problems of others.”

McCallum is a mother and grandmother and lives on Lake Wisconsin. She does volunteer work since retiring in 2019. For many years, she has been engaged in volunteer work for glaucoma awareness – having struggled with vision challenges her entire life – and has served on the University of Wisconsin Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences Advisory Board. She is also an accomplished pianist. “Playing a musical instrument is also good for your brain – keeps you sharp,” she said. Now 73, she has “earned every one of those years.”

Reflecting on her career, she said, “You never see the trailblazing you are doing for others.” As part of “the breakout generation” of the class of 1977 women lawyers, “we didn’t think of the larger context of what we were doing at

the time because we were just trying to figure out how to survive law school and how to pay for it.”

“Now that I reflect over a long career and remember the younger women lawyers I hired and mentored, and the others who I may not have known but who watched us enter the profession and show how it could be done – I am so grateful to have had that opportunity.”

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