



A Champion of Women Attorneys

By Barry M. Simpson

Late this past summer, Judge Robert E. Colville died. He was a great public servant. His career spanned working as a police officer, the district attorney of Allegheny County, a common pleas court judge and an appellate court judge. He was also a good friend of the PBA. But he was so much more than that. Knowing I could not adequately convey to you the sense of who Judge Colville was, I asked someone who could, my wife Kathi. She welcomed that opportunity and provided the following.

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We lost a true champion of women attorneys when the Hon. Robert E. Colville, a former judge on the Pennsylvania Superior Court and former Allegheny County district attorney, died in September. I worked for Bob Colville in the district attorney's office. My career as an attorney started as an assistant district attorney in 1978; before that, I was a law clerk in the office. Among the clerks were some of the best and brightest women I know. Some stayed with the district attorney's office; others went on to distinguished careers in private practice and on the bench. All were nurtured by Bob Colville in the same way our male counterparts were.

That nurturing did not end with the clerks. Bob Colville hired women to be assistant district attorneys. The district attorney's office had a significantly higher percentage of women attorneys than any law firm in Allegheny County at the time. Bob Colville worked with women as administrators and as supervisors. He assigned high-profile cases to women. All of the attorneys in the office wanted to handle challenging cases, and gender was no bar to being assigned such a case. If you worked hard, demonstrated competence and were comfortable in the courtroom, there was no ceiling, glass or otherwise.

I came to learn that in private practice the opportunity to handle a case from its inception to verdict was an elusive prize for most female attorneys. Not so with our boss. With Bob Colville, you got cases and you ran with them. From pre-

liminary hearings through arguments before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, from post-conviction proceedings to the Third Circuit, there was never any suggestion that a woman could not handle the job. Bob Colville did not assign those cases to the assistants, but he made sure he had supervisory attorneys who understood that case assignments were not to be determined on gender. As an attorney in the appeals unit, I had 19 cases in the Supreme Court and 23 in Superior Court in two years. I argued almost all of them. I argued two cases in the Third Circuit. These statistics are not unique to me — they were surely eclipsed by other women. No one told us that the appellate courts were reserved for men; in Bob Colville's eyes, they were not.

On the trial level, the trenches where you learned your craft were called general trial. If you “survived,” you were promoted to units that handled the prosecution of serious crimes. All serious crime units had female members; some had women as supervisors. I moved out of appeals and spent five years as a trial attorney. There was no thought that women could not try legally and factually challenging cases. We handled rape, robbery, aggravated assault and drug cases. Many of the assistants aspired to try homicide cases, female prosecutors among them. They did not have to convince Bob Colville that a woman was “worthy” or could handle that kind of case — he knew that. If you deserved the assignment, it was your case.

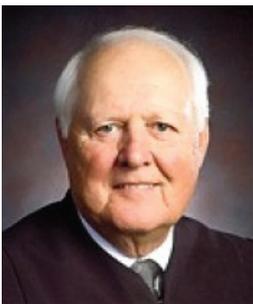
Under Bob Colville, the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office was an empowering place for a woman to work. For those of us who left the office to go on to other employment, we took the skills that we honed and that sense of empowerment with us. I know I am not alone when I say that I am the trial attorney I am because of Bob Colville and because of his confidence and his trust. From my heart, thank you, Judge Colville.

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Barry M. Simpson
Executive Director



Kathryn L. “Kathi” Simpson



Judge Robert E. Colville