

Rensselaer County Judge Debra Young (12-05-2016)

Dolores Bolden: Judge, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us and speak with us. The first question is, what led you to the law, and who were your role models?

Judge Young: That's an interesting question, who led me to the law and who my role models were. I was actually a biology major in college and worked for several years at Albany Medical Center before I made the decision to go to law school. When I was in college, I had a very good friend whose father was general counsel at General Electric, and I spent quite a bit of time at their house, and it was a joke that he would become a lawyer and I would go to medical school. His mother used to say to me, "I don't know why you want to go to medical school. You obviously should go to law school. That is where you belong," during the heated legal conversations that they used to have at the dinner table.

When I graduated from college and worked for a few years, I like to say the law school was right across the street from the medical center, and the pull of the law just took me there, much to the dismay of my mother. My grandfather had been a lawyer, and she always said, "Whatever you do, just don't go to law school," which is probably why it took me so long to make the decision that that's where I should be. But it was the best decision I ever made, and I really never looked back.

Dolores Bolden: Excellent. Your role models would be your ...

Judge Young: I went to school in Baltimore, Maryland, so I spent a lot of time in Washington D.C. At the time, Sandra Day O'Connor became the first Supreme Court justice. She was someone that made a rather large splash when I was in high school and college. She was someone that I really looked up to. When I got a little bit older, Madeleine Albright, who became the first female Secretary of State, was someone who inspired people of my generation, I think, to go further.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. Thank you. All right. When you were at Albany Law School, was it your goal to become a judge?

Judge Young: Actually, my decision to become a judge came much later. After law school, I clerked at the Appellate Division for a year, and then I went into private practice. I was doing medical malpractice defense for a fairly

prominent firm in Albany. What struck me when I started out there was I would be the only woman in the room. When I would go in for depositions, it would be me, and it would be the court reporter. We would typically be the only women, and then a room full of old men.

When I got out and started to try cases, I realized that it was the same on the bench, that everywhere I went, it was a rarity to see a woman sitting as a judge. I thought, "I could do that job. I have what it takes to become a judge, and I would like to do that." Again, it was a little bit later in my career that I made the decision to go from practicing law to being a judge.

Dolores Bolden: Did you encounter any gender or diversity issues at any of your jobs or in law school at all?

Judge Young: Not really when I was in law school. When I first started practicing, obviously it was the rarity to have a female trial lawyer, and particularly in medical malpractice defense. That's a niche area of the law, but I definitely saw a change. It's interesting. I told you when I started out, I'd be the only woman, me and the court reporter, occasionally a witness, and right before I took the bench, I went to a deposition, and every single person in the room was a woman, except for the witness, who was a man. I thought, "What a difference in just 15 years," from when I started to when I left.

Now, in my role as a judge, I am on the county court bench, which is typically a boy's court, is the way I think of it. I went to a meeting this weekend for an association that I'm a member of, and I walked into a room, and I felt like I did when I started practicing law. It was me and a room full of men. I said, "I hope by the time I leave the bench that room is different," the way it was when I was practicing law, and that's important.

Dolores Bolden: Yes. Thank you, Judge. It appears that during your years in private practice, and especially after becoming partner, you were engaged in public service as a Schodack council person and as a Hoosick Town attorney. Is that how you positioned yourself to get the nomination in 2012?

Judge Young: Absolutely. I made the decision in the early 2000s that I wanted to become a judge. I thought it was a job I would be well-suited for, something I was interested in. I love the law, and when you're an attorney, you spend not enough time really focused on the law, because

you have other issues, particularly when you're a partner, to deal with, personnel issues and client management issues. I didn't enjoy those as much as I really loved the law.

I was appointed to the Schodack Town Board in 2005, because you have to be in it, politics, unfortunately, to wind up in this job. I really liked that job a lot, as a town board person. I ran in 2005, and then again in 2009, and I really felt I was able to give back to my community in that position. The Hoosick Town attorney gave me a chance to advise other people on how to handle municipal issues that I had dealt with in my own experience as a town board person. It was exactly that experience that got me where I am today.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. Was there any gender-based opposition to your candidacy?

Judge Young: Not really. The Town Board in Schodack is four town board members. At the time, I was the only woman. The supervisor was a woman. When I started, she lost a re-election, and a man was elected to that position. Definitely, I didn't experience any bias against me because I was a woman. In fact, people were like, "We want a woman on the board because we need some balance there. It just can't be men making these decisions." I also had younger children. A lot of the other individuals were older, so I think they liked the fact that I was young and could speak to the issues that affect the children a little bit more.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. In your campaign, did you in any way emphasize that, if elected, you would be the first woman in the job?

Judge Young: I wouldn't. Typically, when I would go out and talk about who I was, I would talk about my qualifications, my experience, the fact that I wanted to do the job. I know other people would occasionally mention it and bring it up. It wasn't something I would put forth. In fact, I didn't even know that I was going to be the first woman until I had already decided to run. That was something that came to my attention probably four or five months into the campaign, and I said, "Oh!" I hadn't honestly even thought about it. It was a job I wanted, a job I thought I could do, and I went for it.

Dolores Bolden: Excellent. Thank you. Have we reached a point where being a woman is no longer a disadvantage in seeking judgeship and has become an advantage?

Judge Young: I think it was definitely an advantage. In several recent judicial campaigns, that issue has been a plus, particularly in this district. Yes.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. In 2013, you became the first woman in history of the Third Judicial Department to be elected to County Court. This is a seven-county region with a number of medium-sized cities like Albany, Troy, and Kingston. There had to have been other women qualified as county court judge. What took so long?

Judge Young: I think what took so long is that this is a job that does not turn over often. In this county, we only had one county court judge until 2005, and it's a 10-year term. It just takes time for those positions to become available for someone to run, if I'm making myself clear.

Dolores Bolden: Very clear.

Judge Young: It's difficult to run against an incumbent. Once you are in, you're in. I think that's the explanation. Unless somebody moves up, you're in the job for a long time.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. Presiding Justice Peters told us that when she was a young criminal defense attorney, there was an attitude amongst the judges that, quote, "I was a girl, and there were no girl criminal defense attorneys at that time." When you first took the bench, did you encounter any attitude that perhaps a woman shouldn't be dealing with murderers, rapists, other violent criminals?

Judge Young: I think that there's definitely a feeling among people that I'm going to be a nicer judge than, perhaps, if I were a man and that I'm more sympathetic to people's stories. I definitely get that impression, particularly from the people that appear in front of me. I get a lot of letters from individuals just pleading for a break. I definitely believe that there is a thought that I will be somehow more lenient than if I were a man. I can't say that's true, but I think that's people's attitudes.

Dolores Bolden: Yes. Thank you. If you could talk to the people who blazed your trail, going back to Kate Stoneman and all the way up to Judith Kaye and Karen Peters, what would you say to them?

Judge Young: Thank you. It was a lot of hard work that those women put into blazing the trail for people like me. I can only hope that I can carry on in their tradition and that I make them proud as I continue in my career.

Dolores Bolden: I'm already proud. Thank you.

Judge Young: That would be my hope.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. Do you feel any obligation to pick up where they left off, or has the gender battle been fought and won?

Judge Young: I don't know that it's ever going to be fought and won, to be honest with you. I hope that we can eventually get to the point where we don't talk about men and women, we just talk about people and someone being the best person for the job, and that we're not looking at gender, one way or the other, as a positive or a negative.

Dolores Bolden: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Liz Yoquinto: Did you have any female professors in law school?

Judge Young: Oh, I had many female professors when I was there, and I think, when I was at Albany Law School, just about half my class was women. I don't know how many of those went on to actually practice law, but there were many female professors there. Patty Salkin was there. She's the one that comes to mind. It has changed quite quickly and radically.

I don't know if you looked at the portraits out in the hallway or out in the rotunda. They've got Bar Association pictures throughout the years, and you can see the women increasing throughout the years, which is interesting.