



# Then and Now

## One Woman's Awakening in Law and Politics

— By Hon. Susie L. Norby —

**T**he first time I entered a courtroom to the sound of the words “All rise,” I climbed the steps to the bench while a crowd of silent people stood, sizing me up, categorizing me, anticipating placing their troubles into my hands. It was surreal — I felt as much an imposter as an authority, as fearful of failing as I was eager to impress, and full of wonder that life had delivered me there, to a time and place where my opinions would shape people's futures and my voice speak for justice.

Now, in my 15th year and third term as a trial judge, time has instilled confidence in my knowledge of the law, courts, processes and politics. But this cultivated assuredness is a stark contrast to the self-doubt that plagued me earlier in life.

If you had told me at age 10, 20 or 30 that I would one day be an elected judge, I would have scoffed. I didn't think women did that kind of work, and even if they did, I didn't see myself as the sort of authoritative woman who could. I thought that political candidates were prodigies who always knew they would run for office and were always expected to win. I thought that all judges were predestined to wear their robes. Candidates and judges seemed born advantaged and influential, different from ordinary people like me.

And for hundreds of years, that was probably true.

People I meet today seem to assume that I also fell naturally into my judicial role and followed a golden path that led here. But in fact, no one who knew me in my youth saw me as a potential lawyer, much less a candidate or judge. I didn't see myself that way either.

One employer I worked for after college said he didn't think I was smart enough to get into law school. Later, a prominent attorney told me to quit law school and find a day job I could actually do. In 1992, a district attorney told me I was hired for my good legs, but I wasn't expected to amount to much. In 2006 — during my fourth judicial campaign — that same DA told others that I was a three-time loser and crazy to try again.

Partners in renowned law firms urged me to withdraw from my judicial campaigns to save myself the embarrassment of defeat. They said that if I didn't back off, I would alienate power brokers and undermine my future in the law. Newspaper endorsements told voters that my male opponents were far more qualified than I was. And my former husband asked why I was wasting my time trying to be a judge when I should know it was well beyond my capability.

Voters shut doors in my face; community leaders shunned me. Only one person never doubted I would one day win, and I told him he was probably wrong — until midnight on my fourth election day, when I began to come from behind, surging to a surprise victory.

When I was born in 1964, only 3 percent of U.S. lawyers were female. When I earned my high school diploma in 1981, just 12 percent were female — and I'd never met one. When I was in 10th grade, my family watched a TV series called “The Paper Chase” about a strict law school professor; he was male, and so were all of his students. Once, in 11th grade, I heard a senior boy brag that he was going to Cornell University for his undergraduate studies so he could more easily get into its law school later. I remember thinking: “Must be nice to be a boy and have options like that.”

Men were lawyers, doctors and leaders. Women were secretaries, teachers and wives. A woman's worth was derived from the man she married, but I was a late bloomer and couldn't even get a date to the senior prom. So from where I stood in high school, I wasn't well-equipped to find a place in the world.

My parents expected me to go to college, though, and I didn't have a better plan. I played the harp and was good at it, so instead of emphasizing academics, I chose a college that was cheap and that gave me a music scholarship for harp performance. Money was tight for our family, and I didn't want to waste it on school when I didn't have a plan for what I'd do after graduating. My only notable goal in college was to win a prize in a bodybuilding competition. I did that, but only to adopt the interests of my muscle-bound boyfriend.

I didn't have an identity of my own.

After earning my bachelor's degree, I moved home to New Jersey and spent a couple of years commuting on trains to New York City to work as a receptionist and secretary in a big advertising agency. Although it was the mid-1980s, the advertising world was still as depicted in “Mad Men.” I answered phones, typed, took my bosses' clothes to the dry cleaners, bought gifts for them to give wives and girlfriends. I earned \$15,000 per year, not even enough to move out of my parents' home.

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**Opposite Page:** Judge Susie L. Norby was first elected to the Clackamas County Circuit Court in 2006. She is a member of the Oregon Bench and Bar Commission on Professionalism and the Council on Court Procedures. Photo by Kevin Barry



A young Susie Seabrook (third from left) poses with her Brownie troop in the early 1970s. When the future Judge Susie Norby was growing up, she says, she believed that men could be lawyers, doctors and leaders and that women were secretaries, teachers and wives. "So from where I stood," she says, "I wasn't well-equipped to find a place in the world." Photo courtesy of Hon. Susie L. Norby



Susie Norby graduated from Northwestern School of Law in May 1990, when roughly 20 percent of U.S. lawyers were women. Looking back, she says that just being admitted to train in the law transformed the way others treated her, as if she'd magically become "someone whose ideas and advice mattered." Photo courtesy of Hon. Susie L. Norby

Manhattan was exciting, but much seedier and more dangerous than it is now. There were X-rated theaters and panhandlers on every corner. Often, I saw flashers bare themselves in Pennsylvania Station as I waited for my train home. I felt somewhat grown up, but I was dead broke and still without direction or purpose. I was a

face in the crowd, and it eventually became clear to me that Prince Charming might never come to rescue me from my empty life. I realized then that the only alternative to my aimless existence would be to rescue myself.

So I made a list of my strengths, which wasn't very long: Good at reading, writ-

ing and talking; good at solving puzzles; strong moral compass; good at styling hair. I knew that lucrative careers required special training, and I wanted a sure bet. Technical school seemed more practical than higher education, and beauty school sounded promising, but what I really wanted was a technical school for reading, writing and speaking.

It was 1986, and there was a new series on TV about lawyers, with a surprising minor character. The show was "L.A. Law," and one of the lesser lawyers was female. That made me wonder if law school might be an option after all, as a way to learn a trade that fit my skill set. I decided to take the LSAT. If I did poorly, I told myself, I'd go to beauty school. If I did well, I'd apply to law schools. That test was the springboard to the rest of my life. On a scale of 1 to 48, I received a 48. Law schools from all over the country sent me brochures, and I won a scholarship to Lewis & Clark's Northwestern School of Law.

My mom was a middle school teacher. My dad was a community college professor and Episcopal priest. I don't know what surprised them more — that I was going back to school, that I planned to become a lawyer or that I was moving to Oregon to do it. They beamed with pride and helped me pack.

My first memory of feeling a whisper of confidence happened on the plane ride to Portland to enroll at Northwestern School of Law in 1987, when 19 percent of U.S. lawyers were female. Right after takeoff, the passenger next to me asked where I was going, and I replied that I was going to law school. For the rest of the three-hour flight, she told me her troubles, asking my advice and opinions about how she could turn things around. It was the first time a stranger ever presumed that my ideas could help solve her problems.

I was overcome by gratitude for being valued for my thoughts. I was the same person I had been when I was dateless for the prom, the same person who was aimless in college, the same person who languished as a receptionist and got flashed at Penn Station. I hadn't yet completed a single day of law school. But to her, the mere fact that I'd been admitted to train in the law transformed me into someone else, someone whose ideas and advice mattered. Although I had seen men of all ages be consulted in



Susie Norby's first job after law school was in a Multnomah County courtroom, clerking for Judge Robert W. Redding. "He showed me that there is no work more noble, or more humbling, than being a judge," she says. Photo courtesy of Hon. Susie L. Norby

that deferential way, I knew it was special and rare for that to happen to a young woman. And I am often still overcome by the experience of feeling valued for my ideas, even after years as a judge.

I was not the stellar law student that my LSAT score predicted, but I fared well enough and excelled in the mock trial program — winning a school competition with one partner, a regional competition with another partner and earning a place on the first team from my law school to be invited to the national competition in Houston in 10 years. The experience erased my fear of courtrooms and made me want to be a litigator.

My first job after law school was in a Multnomah County courtroom, clerking for Judge Robert W. Redding. He had many worthy applicants but hired me at his secretary's insistence. Because I had also been a secretary, she knew I would treat her as an equal. We remain friends today.

Judge Redding added dimension to my perspective on the judiciary. He was hard-working, objective, respectful and fair. He was articulate and reasoned soundly. He stayed at the courthouse all night if necessary to read the documents that would fully prepare him for the next day's work. He was calm, cool and collected on the bench, but human behind the scenes. And he cared deeply about every decision he made. He showed me that there is no work more noble, or more humbling, than being a judge.

Still, it didn't occur to me that I could ever become one.

While working as Judge Redding's judicial clerk, I passed the bar exam in 1991, when 23 percent of American lawyers were female. Shortly afterward, I was hired to work as a criminal prosecutor in Clackamas County. After five years there, I accepted a job as an associate attorney for the Clackamas County Counsel. For the next 10 years, I served the board of county commissioners, the tax assessor and sheriff, the heads of departments like the Housing Authority, the Department of Transportation and Development, and some service districts.

It was there that my sense of self-worth finally blossomed. My second-most-memorable epiphany that I might have more potential than I believed happened there. My boss, a brilliant attorney who I deeply respected, gave me a performance review that was stunningly complimentary of my skills and work ethic. When it came time to offer me constructive criticism, all he said was, "It is maddening that you refuse to believe how good you are, how hard-working, and how much you bring to the table. You're among the finest attorneys I've ever worked with, but you project that you're not. You need to get over that. In this business, if you don't project confidence, and believe in yourself, no one will see who you already are, and that will only hurt you."

I could tell that he meant every word, so I began to believe him and to imagine aspirations that I had never felt possible before. The most far-fetched was the possibility of being a judge, but I worked



Now-retired Judge Ronald Thom administers the oath of office to newly elected Judge Susie L. Norby during her January 2007 investiture. Judge Thom beat Norby in her first race for judge by 51 percent to her 49 percent, but they forged a lasting friendship during that hard-fought campaign that culminated with his request to swear her in six years later. Photo by Debbie Spradley



Judge Susie L. Norby at her investiture in 2007, joining her predominantly male colleagues on the Clackamas County Circuit Court bench, all seated to her right. Now-retired Judge Eve L. Miller (front row, second from right) became the second female judge in the county when she was appointed in 1997. Photo by Debbie Spradley

up my courage to try. When applications for judicial appointments fell flat, I realized that there was only one way for me to have a chance at such a future — by overcoming my disinclination to run for office and rolling the dice in local politics.

I first ran for election against five opponents in 1999, when 28 percent of U.S. lawyers were female. I ran again in 2000, and again in 2004. I lost, and lost, and lost. But I learned new things about politics from each campaign effort, and new things about myself from each defeat.

In my fourth campaign, I risked contacting Betty Roberts, a former Oregon Supreme Court justice and icon of female leadership. She didn't know me, but she wrote back immediately and met with me the next day. She advised me, endorsed me and gave me an enthusiastic quote for the voters pamphlet. I told her I was sorry I could never repay her. She replied that in fact I could, by helping other women succeed in politics whenever I get the chance.

There were many other helpers too, people who balanced out the painful aspects of each campaign effort. A growing ensemble of ordinary yet extraordinary people with heart and skills gave of their time, expertise and money to improve my slim chance of winning. I met them when I least expected it, all along the way, and photos I keep of them in my chambers continue to remind me that even when I thought I was alone, it wasn't true. Kind people cared and swept away scores of obstacles to swing me toward success.

In April 2006, when 30 percent of U.S. lawyers were female, I won an election that made me the 80th female judge in Oregon's history, the third female judge in Clackamas County's history, and the only female ever elected to Clackamas County's judiciary in a contested race. On Jan. 2, 2007, I opened the fearsome door to the ivory tower, fully intending to redecorate.

I thought the hardest part was over, but there were many challenges to come. For a long time, being there was as difficult as getting there. I cared deeply about every decision, and dozens had to be made in a single day. Mountains of information had to be assimilated on short timelines. And though hours were spent listening, I knew that when I did speak, my words and tone were monumentally important — even though I hadn't yet learned how best to use them.

Another challenge was having emotions I didn't expect to be so difficult to harness. There's no crying allowed on the bench, it turns out, no matter how heartbreaking the case is.

I was repeatedly concerned that first year that I had unintentionally misled my supporters, and I wasn't cut out for the work. But every day was a new chance to get it right, and I persevered. When I attended my first statewide judicial conference, I ran into Judge Redding, my inspiration for the work. He asked me how I liked being a judge. I didn't want to be downbeat, but I couldn't lie. So I replied, "Well, it's a lot harder than I thought it would be." He laughed softly and spoke conspiratorially.

"Only if you're doing it right," he said.

Now, in 2020, 36 percent of American lawyers are female, with the percentage rising every year. Seven of Clackamas County's 12 judges are now female, and even more profound diversity beyond gender balancing is beginning to reshape Oregon's judiciary. It's a very different world than the one that filled me with self-doubt, like many women trying to find our place in the 1980s.

Whatever challenges the world faces today, there are now myriad options for women that I never dreamed of in my youth. The truest lesson I have learned is this: If we don't allow self-doubt or the opinions of others to define us, if we reach beyond the limitations the world seems to allow, then our voices can do more than rise for justice.

They can reveal us to ourselves. ■

*Hon. Susie L. Norby served as a deputy district attorney for Clackamas County and as senior legal counsel to the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners, the tax assessor and other county officials before she was elected to the Clackamas County Circuit Court in 2006. She is a member of the Oregon Bench and Bar Commission on Professionalism and the Council on Court Procedures.*

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