

Elizabeth Langer, The Birth of the Women's Rights Law Reporter, Barnard Magazine (November 30, 2010)

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Remember 1968? Many of us Barnard graduates vividly recall the turmoil, political longings and sense of empowerment we felt during that year—the Vietnam War protests, the Institute for Defense Analysis recruiting on Columbia's campus, Columbia's plans to gentrify Morningside Park. We had worked hard to get to Barnard and even harder to make it through to graduation. But the historical moment that year was unlike any other.

Each of us processed this remarkable year in our own way. To me it confirmed that students could initiate meaningful change in an academic institution. In 1969, I set aside carefully drawn plans to pursue a teaching career in European history and joined the defense staff of the "Chicago Conspiracy Trial." Working with David Dellinger, Abbie Hoffman, Tom Hayden, Jerry Rubin, Bill Kunstler, and Leonard Weinglass on that five-month political trial provided me with organizing skills and a very different life direction. In 1970, I enrolled in Rutgers Law School—Newark, affectionately known as "People's Electric Law School."

The entering class was 20 percent women—a previously unheard of proportion. The exhilaration among the entering women students was palpable. In making the decision to apply to law school, we were stepping out of our comfort zones. Ours was a generation groomed to be housewives, teachers, secretaries, or nurses. Not one of us women arrived at law school in 1970 with a lifelong ambition of becoming an attorney; that was not an avenue of choice normally presented to women of our generation. To the contrary, a woman entering law school in 1970, or before, can be presumed to have a story. These stories touch on common themes: how we arrived, the obstacles in our paths, our responses to these obstacles, what we absorbed and what we rejected in the legal curriculum, how we altered a hitherto male-dominated legal profession, where we took our newly minted knowledge and power, and lastly where we landed and how we link ourselves to the generation of women law students today.

In 1970, the women's movement was beginning to take hold, and women's consciousness-raising groups were being formed under the slogan "Sisterhood is Powerful." The group meetings were empowering, with supportive women discussing gender issues during a time of dramatic gender evolution. To mediate my entry into law school, still a male domain, I joined a women's group in Newark. It included Ann Marie Boylan, a recent graduate of Rutgers Law School. At an early meeting, Boylan spoke about her efforts to establish a new feminist journal—the Women's Rights Law Reporter (WRLR)—in her Newark apartment. At that time, the notion of a legal journal focused on women's issues was a novel and fairly radical idea. Boylan had managed to publish one issue, but lacked funds and personnel to keep the publication afloat. To

me it made perfect sense that the journal should be housed at Rutgers Law School. A number of my fellow students agreed. “Piece of cake,” I thought.

After meeting with Rutgers’ dean James Paul, we realized it would not be a “piece of cake.” The law school administration was less than eager to embrace the new publication on women’s rights. We were told that Rutgers would provide neither funds nor office space nor an affiliation with the Law School. Our only hope for keeping WRLR alive was to raise the needed funds ourselves, find a faculty advisor acceptable to the dean, and negotiate for office space.

There was enough student interest to begin satisfying the administration’s conditions. Professor Ruth Bader Ginsburg was asked and readily agreed to take on the position of faculty advisor. With the support of Professor Annamay T. Sheppard, the Rutgers Urban Legal Clinic made space for the WRLR in an old building they occupied behind the main law school facility. An advisory board was established including Professor Arthur Kinoy, Pauli Murray, and Eleanor Holmes Norton. Fund-raising letters were mailed out, and we managed to secure small grants from several organizations, including the Women’s Center at Barnard College. With the dean’s conditions met, the WRLR was permitted to reside at Rutgers Law School. To our dismay, however, the administration decreed that there was to be no mention of Rutgers Law School in the publication.

A staff of student volunteers was assembled. It was agreed that WRLR would not become a typical law review, but would function as a law reporter featuring short articles and case summaries exclusively on women’s rights issues. It was also agreed that WRLR would incorporate graphics, rejecting the look of the typical law journal. Our first issues were collectively conceived and published with conscious effort made to avoid the traditional law review hierarchy.

WRLR was fortunate to have Professor Ginsburg as faculty advisor. She had a deep and active interest in women’s rights issues. She had authored the American Civil Liberties Union’s Supreme Court brief in *Reed v. Reed* in 1971 and was preparing to teach a new seminar on women’s rights. As faculty advisor, Professor Ginsburg devoted many hours to writing and editing, counseling the staff, attending meetings, and inevitably mediating with the administration when problems arose. Her comment on *Reed v. Reed* appeared as the lead article in the first issue published at Rutgers.

By the spring of 1973, WRLR had published three issues, a labor of love by the student board. Forty years later, it is still publishing at Rutgers Law School—the first among many current legal publications devoted to women’s issues. It is the gift of a remarkable historical moment, nurtured by a Barnard connection. For that we are grateful.

After 35 years of practicing law in Washington, D.C., Elizabeth Langer closed her law office, moved to Manhattan, and began a second career in painting, printmaking, and collage. She has a studio on West 28th Street [Ed.: now on West 103rd Street] and her work can be seen at www.elizabethlanger.com. A solo exhibit at FX Fowle Architects

Gallery, 22 West 19th Street will open in March. The Barnard community is invited to the opening reception March 25 at 5:30 PM.