

FROM WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVOCATES TO
LITIGATOR TO MOTHER TO PAINTER—
TRANSITIONS FROM LEFT BRAIN TO RIGHT BRAIN

From Women's Rights Advocate to Litigator to Mother to Painter—Transitions from Left Brain to Right Brain

By Elizabeth Langer

My path to women's rights advocate, litigator, mother, and painter was not straightforward. During my childhood, I loved drawing and had an active interest in medicine. Law was never in my scope. There were no lawyers in our family—my father was a psychoanalyst and my mother was a college professor—and my life was devoid of experiences that would foretell an interest in law.

After high school, I enrolled at Barnard College with no career plan. My senior year at Barnard, 1968, was an extraordinary year. During the spring, student protests upended the Columbia campus—protests over the university's involvement in military research for the war effort in Vietnam, as well as the university's plans to build a student gymnasium in Morningside Park, displacing many low-income black residents of Morningside Heights. Students for a Democratic Society was an active force on the campus, and the entire Columbia-Barnard community was involved in intense debate over the university's actions. From April 23 to May 22, 1968, 850 protesting students were arrested for criminal trespass. I was one of them.

Many students were injured during the Columbia protests after police cleared the campus. I spent a night at the Women's Detention Center in Lower Manhattan with six other Barnard students before being released on bail provided by a Barnard alumna. Most remarkable

about the experience was that students had closed down the university. Classes and exams were cancelled, and replaced by "teach-ins" about the war, racism, poverty, and the morality of protest. It was a transformative moment in history and a transformative moment in the lives of the students.

Oddly, the arrest turned out to have no adverse consequences in my life. Instead, perhaps it had positive consequences. I had taken a stand and crossed a line. Much to my surprise, years later when I applied for membership in the DC Bar, the Maryland Bar and more recently, the New York Bar, I passed muster with the Character and Fitness Committees. More surprisingly, years later (in 1976) I was hired by the U.S. Department of Justice under the Ford Administration and managed to secure "Secret" FBI clearance.

After graduation from Barnard, I headed to Chicago. Looking for work, I discovered that my degree in European History cum laude meant nothing in the real world. Each employment agency I visited required that I take a typing test for placement in a secretarial position. Those were the days of gender-based help wanted ads. In September 1969—after a year of drudge work in a quasi-secretarial position—I responded to a call for volunteers placed by the defense staff of the "Chicago Conspiracy Trial."

...(Continued on page 20)



Elizabeth Langer



Ode to H.M. (Collage) / 9 x 12



Elizabeth (Oil) / 15 x 12

(Continued from page 4)...In March, 1969, a federal grand jury returned indictments against David Dellinger, Bobby Seale, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Rennie Davis, John Froines, and Lee Weiner—key organizers of protests held during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The defendants, from different factions of what was known as “The New Left,” ranged in philosophy from pacifist to Black Panther. They had planned demonstrations to coincide with the national theater of the 1968 Democratic Convention; some protesting the war in Vietnam, others promoting the culture of the Youth International Party (YIPPIES), with many feeling that any semblance of the democratic system had irretrievably collapsed after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in the spring of 1968.

My first assignments were odd jobs: typing, copying, and stuffing envelopes. Later I was promoted to paid staff and assigned to help with witness testimony and legal research, organizing demonstrations and speaking engagements in support of the trial. I also handled layout, art, and design for pamphlets, posters, and buttons. Days were spent at the federal courthouse and nights were occupied with trial preparation, lining up as many as eight witnesses for the next day. One of my tasks was accompanying defense witnesses to the witness room before their trial testimony, answering their questions, and reviewing their testimony and anticipated cross-examination. It was fascinating. There I was, a 23-year-old with no legal training, prepping witnesses for a trial covered by the national media. I worked with Jesse Jackson, Alan Ginsberg, Dustin Hoffman, Norman Mailer, Judy Collins, Ramsey Clark, Dick Gregory, Roger Wilkins, Timothy Leary, Arlo Guthrie, Country Joe, and others who had participated in, or witnessed, the 1968 Chicago demonstrations.



Holding On (Acrylic & Chalk) / 30 x 30

This trial was my first glimpse of law practice, and, not surprisingly, it looked very different from what I had imagined. It provided a sense of direction that was clearer than ever before. I knew it was time to apply to law school. There was never a question about which law school to choose: Rutgers Law School in Newark, then known as “The Peoples’ Electric Law School,” was the school that many of the young defense attorneys had attended.

Arriving at Rutgers Law in the fall of 1970, I took my place in an entering class of 320. More than 60 women were enrolled in that class, and for most of us it was difficult to determine whether the uneasiness we felt entering law school was greater than our sense of relief or fear. In 1970, there were two women faculty members at Rutgers on tenure track, Professors Eva Hanks and

Ruth Bader Ginsburg (now Justice Ginsburg); and two women clinical faculty, Professors Annamay Sheppard and Rita Bender.

During my first year of law school I met a recent Rutgers graduate, Ann Marie Boylan, who was attempting to establish a new journal — *The Women’s Rights Law Reporter* (“WRLR”) — in her small Newark apartment. The notion of a legal journal focused on women’s rights and issues was a novel and radical idea at the time. Ann Marie had managed to publish one issue, but had

neither funds nor personnel to keep the publication going. To me it made perfect sense that this journal should be housed at Rutgers Law School. “Piece of cake,” I thought.

After meeting with Dean James Paul, we realized it would not be a piece of cake. The Rutgers administration was less than eager to embrace the new and financially troubled publication, and told us that Rutgers could 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. We were told that if these conditions were met, there was a chance that Rutgers would allow publication of this fledgling journal.

We made it. Professor Ginsburg readily agreed to take on the position of faculty advisor. Professor Sheppard made space for the WRLR in an old building occupied by the Urban Legal Clinic. Dozens of fundraising requests were sent out, and we finally managed to secure enough grant money to get started (our main funders were women's organizations). The dean's conditions had been met, and the WRLR was allowed to reside at Rutgers Law School. It was the first law journal in the U.S. devoted solely to women's issues, and four decades later, it is still publishing.

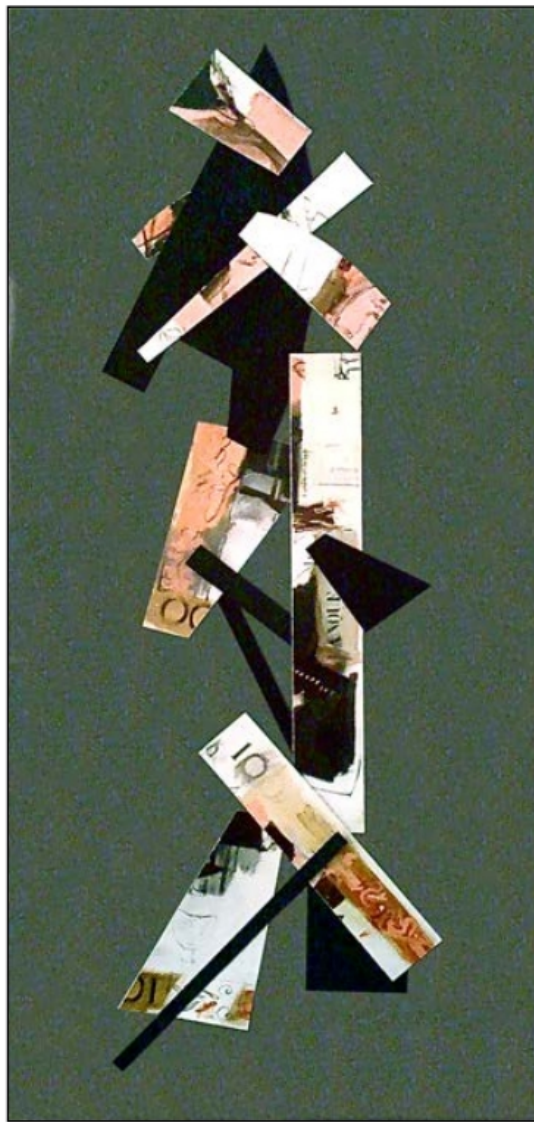
The year of my law school graduation, 1973, was another momentous year in history. The break-in at the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate had occurred in March, and Congress was conducting a highly visible investigation. Later, the House of Representatives held hearings on the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. In the midst of all this, I applied for jobs in Congress, and in June, I was hired by Congresswoman Bella Abzug as her Legislative Assistant. I handled women's issues, privacy and FOIA, and the Nixon impeachment proceedings. When Nixon removed Archibald Cox, the independent Watergate Special Prosecutor, Congresswoman Abzug filed suit in Federal District Court challenging the dismissal. Alan Morrison from Public Citizen represented her in the proceedings, and a few days later, she was victorious. I was enthralled by that litigation. My involvement in that suit convinced me that litigation would be my career path.

In the meantime, I married Richard Chused, a Georgetown Law School professor, and in 1975, our first child was born. Motherhood threw a monkey wrench into my plans, and I searched for a way to be both a mother and a trial lawyer simultaneously. In 1976, I accepted a position as a Trial Attorney with the Civil Division at the Department of Justice for two reasons. First, I had heard that the Civil Division was trying to recruit more women and was even creating an atmosphere that was conducive to full-time working mothers. Second, I wanted to learn how to litigate. I was correct on both scores. Hired into a section of 10 women and two men, I was given choice assignments and flexible hours—and that was 1976! And it was at the Civil Division—at an event sponsored by the WBA—that I heard Judge Patricia Wald speak about her very personal experiences raising children and practicing law. I promptly joined the WBA and remained an active member for 25 years. After six years at DOJ, I started my own law practice.

That law practice would not have been possible without the support of my women colleagues at the WBA.

To make a long story a bit shorter, litigation eventually brought me back to art.

I had been drawing and painting since childhood and had long considered a career in art. I was well aware that I would have to make life choices. At this time, law and motherhood won out.



Larry Rivers Deja Vu (Collage) / 19 x 8

My law practice focused on women's issues, and in 1992, I agreed to represent a young woman, who had been raped at her office building, in a civil suit against the building owner for inadequate security. The matter proceeded as a jury trial in DC Federal District Court. By happenstance, a well-known Washington artist, William Christenberry was on my jury. I had heard that he taught painting classes at the Corcoran School of Art and that he was a superb teacher. A year after the appeal was decided, I enrolled in his drawing and painting class.

I would not be a painter today if Bill Christenberry had not been on my jury. He taught me how to see and, more importantly, how *not* to think. Draftsmanship should not be confused with art, and, in fact, I learned little in the way of technical skills from Bill. What I did learn is what makes the human figure sing, what makes a line stunning, what gives depth and feeling to a composition and most of all, that we must take risks with our work. His favorite expression was, "Don't think so much." In many ways, being an artist is the antithesis of being a lawyer. Bill said, "One of the most important things for an artist is to be able to respond intuitively quickly. Gestures are done to suppress the conscious, logical side of the brain." More quotes from Bill:

"Develop competency, but always have an appreciation for the idiosyncratic."

"Sometimes you just don't know. The creative artist in the process of doing isn't always conscious. The visual artist is always processing information in a curious kind of way—taking it in. Work as if you are in a trance."

"When you break down that barrier of being uptight constantly and take the risk, the chances are much greater for something to happen than not to happen! Break down this mental state! It will not be madness. Something is going to happen!"

And something did happen. In 2008, after 35 years, I traded my law practice for an art studio. I am now working full time at art. It's hard work and sometimes it's very discouraging, but the process and the results continue to amaze me. And I remember what Bill always said when he walked by my work and shook his head: "Not bad for a lawyer."

Elizabeth Langer, formerly a practicing lawyer in DC and long-time WBA member, is now a painter living and working in Manhattan. An exhibit of her paintings, drawings, collages, and etchings can be seen at Crowell & Moring, LLP, 1001 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW through February 27. For information contact Marc F. Efron, 202-624-2640.



The Mothers of Beslan (Paper Lithograph) / 16 x 24