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The Re-Envisioned
Leadership Academy

MOVING THE NEEDLE
on Law Firm Diversity

Geoffrey M. Klineberg
49th President of the D.C. Bar

DCBAR

*Serving our members
so they can serve the community*

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Elizabeth Langer, courtesy of Elizabeth Langer; diversity art, iStock

Elizabeth Langer

Trades Legal Briefs for Canvas

By John Murph



Courtesy of Elizabeth Langer

“You mean, you have a life?” That was the response Elizabeth Langer received from one of her clients when, with great trepidation, she explained that she wasn’t available on Thursdays because of her weekly art classes at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, D.C.

In the early 1990s, Langer had her own private practice in the District focused on representing women in domestic abuse cases. Langer recalls feeling anxious about taking off Thursdays to

pursue her interest in art because people could perceive it as unprofessional. She worried that once clients found out, they would fire her. But to her surprise, they encouraged her.

“I think certain kinds of lawyers draw certain kinds of clients,” Langer says in an interview with *Washington Lawyer* inside her apartment in New York City’s Upper West Side where she lives with her husband, New York Law School professor Richard Chused. “Nasty lawyers draw nasty clients. Lawyers who are more interested in taking care of people who may not have a lot of money to spend on legal fees draw clients who are more interested in reasonable solutions.”

At the Corcoran, Langer studied under noted painter, sculptor, and photographer William Christenberry.

Unbeknownst to her at the time, Christenberry served as a juror in Langer’s first jury trial in the early 1990s. Christenberry’s classes at the Corcoran were so popular that it took Langer several attempts before she could enroll. She remembers how unprepared she was on her first day of class.

“I showed up in class in my courtroom suit with my handbag and everything. Everyone else in class just looked at me,” Langer laughs. “They were all wearing jeans. There was oil paint and charcoal everywhere. [Christenberry] looked at me and said, ‘You can’t really come to class dressed like that.’”

Langer excelled in Christenberry’s drawing and painting classes. Some of her earlier works hang in her apartment, which doubles as a private gallery for a few of her oil, charcoal, and acrylic paintings;

abstract collages; and paper lithographs. Her works have been exhibited in numerous places in New York City, including the Manhattan Graphics Center, the Blackburn 20/20 gallery, the Montclair Public Library, and the Jewish Institute of Religion’s Bernard Heller Museum.

In 2004, Langer’s husband, then a professor at Georgetown University Law Center, received a Fulbright Senior Scholar Fellowship grant to teach at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for five months. Traveling with him to Israel gave Langer the perfect opportunity to take a sabbatical and concentrate on art. But once there, Langer started thinking about dissolving her private practice. “I was ready for another chapter,” she says.

When they returned to the United States, Langer briefly did some trial work. She officially left Washington, D.C., in 2008 when her husband took a job at New York Law School. Langer’s original plan was to dedicate a year solely to art, with the option of opening a law office in New York as a safety net.

‘WE WERE TROUBLEMAKERS’

Langer has always been a New Yorker at heart. She grew up in Greenwich Village, then at age six she moved with her family to Great Neck, New York, a Long Island suburb. Her father, Sydney Langer, was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Her mother, Nikki Langer, was a psychology professor, an accomplished musician, and early feminist (at Hofstra University, she started the school’s first women’s studies program). Perhaps it was Langer’s mother who inspired her to become an activist herself.

In March 2020, during her speech at Rutgers Law School celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Women’s Rights Law Reporter*, of which she was the first editor-in-chief, Langer revealed that she originally wanted to be a doctor. She applied to Boston University’s pre-med program in 1963 but encountered sexism. Even though the senior male faculty members were impressed by her grades and SAT scores, they dissuaded her from enrolling during the interview process. “The admissions office firmly believed that women applied to medical school primarily to find husbands,” Langer told the audience. “My interviewer cited the impressive costs of a medical school education and concluded that the time and money that could

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be used to produce a male doctor would be wasted on a woman."

Langer was outraged. She realized that to fight that sort of discrimination, a law degree might be more useful than a medical degree. After obtaining her BA cum laude from Barnard College, she worked as a legal clerk for attorneys William Kunstler and Leonard Weinglass on the defense for the headline-making Chicago Conspiracy Trial. That experience drove home her desire to pursue a legal career.

When Langer arrived at Rutgers Law School in the fall of 1970, she was among the more than 60 female students in her class. "The entering class was made up [of] an unprecedented 20 percent women," Langer says. "It was said to be the highest in the United States."

That makes sense considering that Rutgers at the time had earned the moniker the "People's Electric Law School," in part for being a cauldron of political activism. Dean Willard Heckel had invited Arthur Kinoy, a revered civil liberties attorney, to join the faculty. Under Heckel's leadership, the law school drew many progressives who advocated for racial justice and fought against the Vietnam War. The women's liberation movement also energized Rutgers.

In 1970, two women faculty members at Rutgers Law School — Eva Hanna Hanks and Ruth Bader Ginsburg — were on track to become tenured professors. In addition, civil rights activists Annamay Sheppard and Rita Bender served on the clinical faculty. "The remaining faculty members were male, many of whom appeared wholly unprepared for the sizable body of women law students entering, or maybe perhaps invading, the campus," Langer says. "The style of instructional banter from many of these men was sometimes crude and often sexist."

"The idea of a woman entering law school in 1970 bordered on audacious. It placed us squarely in the category of [being] odd, even extremely brilliant, [but] not cut out for marriage or children. We were troublemakers," says Langer.

MAKING HISTORY

To help cope with the sexism, Langer joined a women's consciousness group where she met the future cofounders of the *Women's Rights Law Reporter*, Ann Marie Boylan, a recent Rutgers Law graduate, and Diane Crothers, who had just

entered the law school. Both shared with Langer their interest in creating a school-sponsored journal focused on women in the legal field. Boylan had already published one issue, but she lacked funding and personnel to sustain it.


Langer confronted some resistance from the school, but Heckel encouraged her to move forward. After gaining full support from Sheppard, and with Ginsburg serving as faculty adviser to the 19-member staff, the *Women's Rights Law Reporter* — the oldest legal publication in the country focused on women's rights law — launched in 1970.

"[Ginsburg] had a deep interest in women's rights issues," Langer recalls. "She devoted countless hours to writing and editing, counseling the staff, attending meetings, and inevitably mediating problems that arose with the administration."

Langer says the skills she sharpened as an editor helped prepare her for a trailblazing career in the field of women's rights. After graduating from Rutgers, she worked for congresswoman and feminist icon Bella Abzug, and then in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. In 1984, she established her own practice. Langer later hosted the cable TV series *Behind Closed*

Doors, which broadcast out of the University of the District of Columbia and looked at domestic relations from women's perspectives.

With a nearly four-decade legal career behind her, Langer revels in her life as a full-time artist.

She creates most of her work in a nearby studio on Riverside Drive. These days she's focusing on collages, inspired by the Big Apple's towering landscape. She also remains connected to the law, retaining her bar memberships in New York and the District of Columbia. "Who knows? Someday, a case may come along, or I may want to work with the ACLU or some other public interest group," Langer says. "I enjoy the idea of being able to do that." 

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