

92nd Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association

ROCHELLE M. FEDULLO

BY BILL FEDULLO

I spent a dizzying amount of time trying to decide how best to introduce Rochelle Fedullo—Shelli to those who know her—as the 92nd Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association. It’s hard enough to try to capture, in two thousand words and change, the general arc of the life of someone whose professional and personal accomplishments you deeply admire. It’s harder still when that person happens to be your mother. Every attempt to put words to paper starts to feel tantamount to an act of disrespect—a disloyal oversimplification, a glossing over of the details of the life of someone indescribably special to you. But at the end of the day, my mother raised me to believe that you must get the work in front of you done before you can lament it. So, with the helpful comments of my mother’s family, dear friends, and colleagues, here it goes.

When I reached out to Shelli’s circle of intimates, there were a few qualities that they all agreed were central to the person she is. One of those is loyalty. Niki Ingram, director of worker’s compensation at Marshall Dennehey Warner Coleman & Goggin, P.C., who has known Shelli since the early 1980s, said of her, “If she is your friend, she is your friend for life. She loves strongly and fiercely.” Sayde Ladov, former Chancellor of the Association, has similar sentiments: “I know I could call her in the middle of the night and she would be there for me. You can’t say that about too many people.” “She’ll stand up for her friends no matter what,” adds Judge Sandra Mazer Moss (Ret.). Shelli’s steadfastness

in friendship, her commitment to sticking together till the end, has its origin, I think, in how she was raised.

My mother was born in Philadelphia in 1952, to Thelma and Andre Hollender. Both of her parents had backgrounds that made the need for loyalty to family and community obvious. Thelma’s people had come over in waves from Europe and the Caucasus, and had made a place for themselves in Philadelphia’s tight-knit Jewish immigrant neighborhoods. Andre, a teenage survivor of the Holocaust, had been resettled in United States after World War II, where he was trained by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society as a tailor. Being the daughter of a refugee had a profound impact on the way Shelli

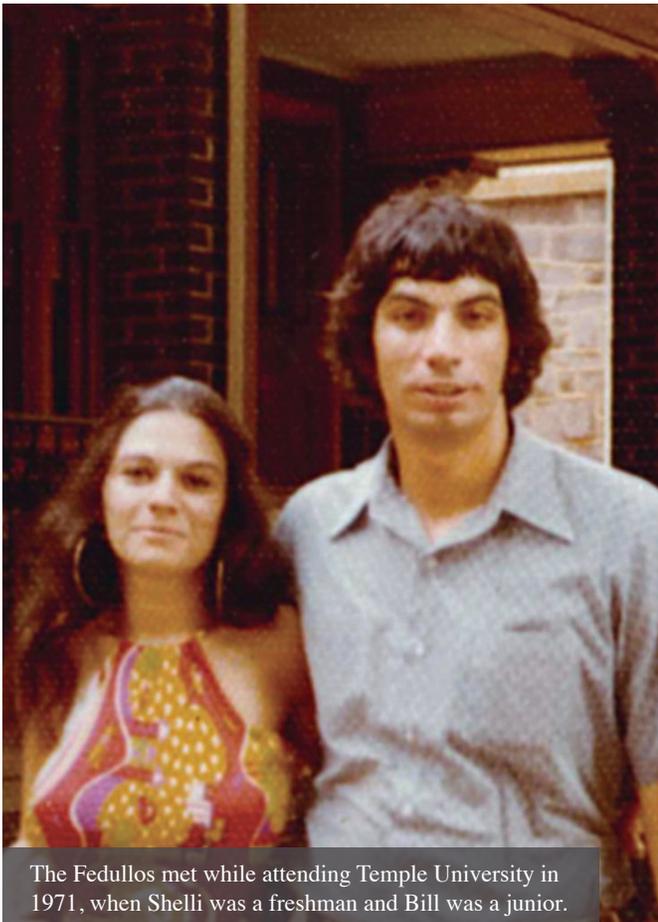




Shelli and her beloved mother Thelma.



Shelli and Bill celebrating her election to the Philadelphia Bar Association board of governors in December 1998.



The Fedullos met while attending Temple University in 1971, when Shelli was a freshman and Bill was a junior.



The Fedullos celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary with the author.

would approach the world. It gave her a deep appreciation for this nation and the values of sanctuary and openness. She's been honored in recent years to be able to address new citizens at naturalization ceremonies, an opportunity she deeply cherishes.

Growing up in North Philadelphia, and then in the Logan section, my mother's family faced its share of hardships. Andre died when Shelli was young, leading Shelli and Thelma to lean closely on their extended family and, in particular, Thelma's sister, Claire, with whom my mother shares a lifelong bond. Shelli never felt deprived throughout her childhood—her household was rich enough in love. The closeness of her

family nourished in Shelli the unrelenting loyalty that those who know her recognize today.

Another quality Shelli's friends recognize is her drive. According to Judge Moss, "She gives 100 percent of herself, at least, all the time." Al Dandridge, Shelli's long-time friend and former Chancellor of the Association, describes her as "tough as nails. She can look around corners and see things that the average person can't." But her drive isn't there to impress or prove herself better than anyone. She isn't a prestige-oriented person; laurels aren't the point. Instead, Shelli is an *achievement*-oriented person—someone who believes that success in academic and professional life is worth pursuing



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for its own sake. The point of achievement is to make you a better person, by forcing you to learn new things, to confront and overcome real challenges.

Thelma nurtured this drive for learning as good in and of itself, immersing my mother in cultural life from a young age. Shelli’s first passion was poetry, and her heroes in high school were Emily Dickinson and the metaphysical poets. After graduating from Olney High School, she matriculated to Temple University, where she pursued a degree in English. She graduated *magna cum laude* in three years in 1973—a testament to her ability to accomplish her goals with speed, attentiveness and excellence.

During her freshman year at Temple, my mother met my father, Bill, who was a junior at the time. They both give somewhat different accounts of their first encounter. As my father tells it, they met for the first time at a nightclub, and made a date to meet the next week at the student activities center, which Shelli did not make. However, Bill was undeterred, and after repeated overtures on his part, the two began dating. In my mother’s version, she liked my father when she met him, but he pointedly did not ask for her number, and did not try to make a date. I’m agnostic as to which story reflects reality, but, regardless, the two of them quickly became inseparable.

After college, Shelli spent the better part of a decade as

an English teacher at William Penn High School, combining her passion for literature with a commitment, instilled in her upbringing, to the people of Philadelphia. My grandmother, about whom two novels could easily be written, was involved in civil rights activism throughout her life, and at one point ran a halfway house to help recently released prisoners reintegrate into society. Though her English education may have been somewhat rarefied, Shelli’s approach to helping her students was intensely practical. She looked for areas where the education system had left them behind, and tried to equip them with the skills necessary to thrive in life.

While Shelli was working as a teacher, Bill, now her husband, enrolled in Delaware Law School (now, Widener University Delaware Law School). Shelli decided to apply to law school after sitting in on one of his classes. As she observed the class—predominantly of men preparing to enter a profession whose ranks still, with some exceptions, largely looked like them—she came to a realization: that she was as smart, as driven and as capable as anyone else in that room. In 1979, she applied and was accepted to Temple Law, taking night classes while continuing her work at William Penn. In her final year of law school, she retired from teaching and worked with my father as a law clerk.

After graduating from Temple, Shelli began her legal career



working in the Philadelphia Law Department. Judge Moss, who worked with Shelli at the Law Department, describes her as approaching the job with a “great deal of courage, a great deal of integrity and dedication.” Shelli, in Judge Moss’s words, showed ingenuity in how she litigated cases, paying careful attention to presentation. “When we represented firefighters, she would have them carry her trial bag into the courtroom to show their chivalrousness to the jury.” The opportunity for courtroom experience afforded by the Law Department set Shelli on the path she would follow for the rest of her career, shaping her into a formidable litigator, unafraid to try a case to verdict.

After leaving the Law Department, Shelli joined Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker LLP as a litigation associate in 1985. Early in her career at Wilson Elser, she became close friends with Kathleen Wilkinson, another young attorney at the firm, who would herself also go on to become Chancellor of the Association. Kathleen recalls the *joie de vivre* she and Shelli shared in their early years at the firm, recounting how, “As young associates, we snuck in through the back-office door in the afternoon with large bags of shoes bought on sale,” only to be “caught by a managing partner, who had been looking for us to do an assignment.” Shelli has spent the bulk of her career—more than three decades of practice—at Wilson Elser, making partner, securing favorable verdicts for her clients and serving as national counsel for a division of a Fortune 500 company.

Beyond being a successful litigator and trial attorney, Shelli has devoted herself to service to the legal community and the City of Philadelphia at-large. She’s helped ensure the high quality of the bench by serving on the Commission for





Special thanks to Gran Caffè L'Aquila for accommodating Shelli and her family.

Judicial Selection and Retention, helped expand pro bono efforts through her role on the board of Philadelphia VIP and mentored high school students. While those who know her would agree she's a glamorous and fashionable person, she's proven herself more than willing to put the time and energy into the everyday, quiet, unglamorous work that makes the Association function—serving on committees, planning events and negotiating contracts. She puts in the effort because she can see the wider purpose of the work the bar does. As my father puts it, "Shelli's biggest asset—beyond her obvious intelligence and commitment—is her optimism. We need to think we can do it before we can actually do it. I think Shelli embodies that can-do attitude."

Another thing Shelli's friends and family can agree on is that she's intensely compassionate. "She's the soul of kindness—an incredibly caring person, and amazingly intuitive," says Sayde. Kathleen adds, "Shelli is not only a dear friend, but she is an 'aunt' to my three children, making sure that Lindsey and Lauren had proper baby jewelry soon after they were born." Al says, "Shelli's a friend, a buddy. She's smart as a whip." For me, I've witnessed my mother act with kindness and grace so often that each instance seems less a discrete happening, and more like a fundamental property of who she is. I think of the way her smile, which literally audibly clicks, can raise the mood of an entire room. I think of how, basically every time that my mother has met friends of mine, they leave the encounter charmed (and maybe, given my general demeanor, slightly surprised) at her outgoing personality and genuine interest in their lives. I think of how, throughout my childhood, she pushed me to succeed, not through overbearing or micro-management, but through vocal confidence in my own ability and skills. The infectiousness of her compassion brings out the best in others, and will serve her well in leading

the Association.

Our family, like every family, has had its share of heartbreak. Last September, my grandmother Thelma, passed away. For several years, due to progressive dementia, she had been living at the Abramson Center for Jewish Life, a senior care facility. My mother's devotion to Thelma throughout her life, and specifically in the twilight of it, epitomize for me what it means to stand by someone you love. Not only did she orient (along with her aunt, Claire Winick) so much of her life around being able to see and talk to her mother as much as possible, she advocated fiercely for her, doing everything she could to ensure that she had access to the best care possible. Her friends recognize her as an example of filial loyalty and love. "Shelli was a devoted daughter," Niki recalls. "Over the years, she lovingly and consistently spent time with her mother, and it was from a sense of love, not obligation." As my father says, "She'll be dedicated to keeping her mother's memory alive throughout her year as Chancellor, in the good things she does for the Bar Association and the citizens of Philadelphia."

I have been afforded many great privileges in my life, for which I am deeply grateful. But as I prepare to enter this profession—as I become, like my parents before me, a Philadelphia lawyer—I can think of no greater blessing than to have my mother as an example of an ethical and passionate practitioner. She will bring her commitment, her energy, and her compassion to her leadership. ■

Bill Fedullo is a third year student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. He will be joining the commercial litigation department at White & Williams as an associate in 2019.