

10 QUESTIONS

for

Deborah R. Willig

FIRST WOMAN CHANCELLOR OF THE PHILADELPHIA BAR ASSOCIATION

INTERVIEW BY NIKI T. INGRAM

It's been 20 years since Deborah R. Willig served as the first woman Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association. Since 1979, she's been a principal in her own firm that concentrates in labor law. She's served as chair and vice chair of a number of Bar Association committees as well as on the Bar Foundation Board of Trustees.

NIKI INGRAM: There have been four women Chancellors since you were Chancellor and there's one on deck. Would you have thought there would have been more women after you? Less women? Or is it about what you thought?

DEBORAH R. WILLIG: It's about what I thought. There will have been five in 20 years. It took how many years to get the first one? 182? I was taught by my parents and some of my mentors that you don't "start at the top." It took a long time for women to get to places within the Association from which you got the experience to run for the Board of Governors and for Chancellor. What I think is terrific about all the women who have served as Chancellors, is that they've all been active in every echelon of the Bar Association. They've been active in committees. They've been committee chairs. They worked their way up to the Board of Governors. They all earned it. They are all talented, and I think they all had that broader vision. They've all been terrific Chancellors and I think Kathleen Wilkinson will be a great Chancellor as well.

Were you conscious of being a trailblazer?

I wasn't as conscious about it then as I am now. I am and will always be the only person who can say, "I was the first woman Chancellor." And when I say it, while I am humbled by it, it also makes me proud. I think in the 1980s, I was probably more conscious frankly, of the sexism I faced. At that time, only one other person had run in a contested election for Chancellor twice. All of the others, who had run once and lost, had a clear field the next time. They did not run in another contested race. I remember getting a call in my office the day after the 1986 election from Bernie Borish, may his soul rest in peace. He was one of the people who had run and lost and the second time around, had no contest. He said, "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you're going to do it again starting tomorrow morning and I'm telling you, take a year off, take a deep breath, get back to work and run the following year." And that was kind of my game plan. But it wasn't the game plan of others. I think a lot of people perceived that a woman would be an easier candidate to defeat. No, I don't think I saw it as trailblazing. It was more a situation of trying to fight off the inherent sexism in the profession at that time. For example, in the first race, a letter was mailed to all of the women in the association signed by four women lawyers saying support [my opponent] because Deborah Willig is not the "right kind of woman." The not-so-subliminal message was: She's too much of an activist. I'm not demure. I was not and am not afraid to take on people and debate controversial issues. I represent labor unions and I am political. I think that scared a lot of people – including, unfortunately, some women.



How do you view sexism in the profession at this point in time?

I think it's changed dramatically. Has it gone away? No. I don't think sexism will ever go away as long as women continue to have the primary parenting responsibility, because that is part of the issue. I think the hiring disparities are all but gone; the salary disparities are pretty much gone. I believe that there are still differences for women in opportunities in partnership tracks, and partnership levels. The practice of law has changed dramatically in the last 36 years. The emphasis now in a partnership decision is more on rainmaking and less on the value of being a good lawyer.

Bringing in business requires a skill set that requires mentoring and inclusion, and I don't know there's a lot of mentoring going on in bigger firms in terms of bringing in business. I doubt that as many women as men play golf, go to football games, or go out to dinner constantly – the things that help bring in business. I believe that the women who do bring in business are rewarded in the same way. At least some of them are. Without naming names, I know there are managing partners of big firms who are rainmakers who are women who got there because they did the same things. They brought in the business. But... as I said before, as long as the primary parenting responsibility is on women, I think just from the time constraints alone, it's harder to "make the rain."

You are one of the few law firms that is run by women. Why do you think there aren't more?

This firm was formed in 1979 and from early on, we recognized that if you thought enough of an individual to hire them in the first place, and then invested the time, effort and money in developing them as a lawyer, why would you not want them to work part-time? We have had part-time employees –including partners – even before there were ever part-time policies. And I don't just mean maternity leave. I mean letting people work part-time. One of the named partners in this firm has been part-time since the birth of her first child. The majority of the women in this firm have worked part-time at some point. It didn't impact on their partnership track; it didn't impact on their compensation. We're a niche firm. We represent labor unions and everything that we do is kind of derivative from the representation of labor unions. People who want to be union side labor lawyers seek us out. We get resumes from the best law schools all over the country. We have a terrific talent pool to reach into. But people also Google us. Applicants look

on our website; people see part time and people hear by word of mouth. We frequently meet with young lawyers, and they tell us that they've checked us out and believe our firm is a good place to work and that we're family friendly. The truth is, we've been family friendly for 31 years.

Somehow we sent that message and we're rewarded by being able to hire people who ultimately became partners who all think the same way. You know, when the first *Bar Reporter* came out in 1992 which included the story about the new Chancellor, Alan Feldman, whose firm is a tenant upstairs, came down into my office and said "I'm really sorry, I really think I might have offended you." I asked why and he told me that there was a quote in the article in which he said that our firm "is more like a commune than a law firm." And I said "Alan, that's the best thing you could have said about us." That's who we are. We want everybody to be treated equally. That's what we do for a living. Many of the lawyers in our firm could work on the management side of labor law – and some of us have been recruited to do so – for dramatically more money. But I think I can say that without exception, all of us do this work on the union side, because this is what we believe in. And part of what we believe in is equal rights, civil rights, women's rights, workers' rights, GLBT rights. It's a fundamental part of the personality of the firm.



Given that's who you are and what's made you successful, why do you think other women haven't started their own firms or been successful when they have?

It takes a certain kind of personality to be willing to shoulder the responsibility, the stress, and the tension of paying the rent, the electric bill, and making sure we can make payroll. I've been the managing partner of the firm since the day it opened. There are not a lot of women – and maybe not a lot of men – who like to do that. Perhaps it comes more naturally to men than women, I don't know. There aren't that many women-owned firms. I know Denise Smyler owns her own firm, and she's been successful in securing local and state government business. I think of Berner, Klaw & Watson, who concentrate in family law. They're a niche firm, too. It is hard to be family friendly in the practice of law and that tended to have an adverse affect on women. I tell people when they're interviewing or associates when they join the firm that our practice is not a 9-to-5 practice. We're there when our clients are in tough straits and that is a lot of the time – when

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they're in collective bargaining, when someone is laid off, when someone is fired, when the economic downturn and political landscape has made for the likes of Wisconsin and Ohio and Michigan. But, in the last 20 years, there has been a dramatic change among lawyers entering the profession sharing parenting responsibilities. I think that has made it somewhat easier for women to work the required hours. That may have changed or be changing the landscape.

How did being Chancellor change your life?

Before I ever thought of running, I asked a former Chancellor: why does one want to be Chancellor? And his answer was power, ego and money. There are high-powered trial lawyers, who, before the Internet, got business by being Chancellor. There is a lot of media exposure in the position and that can translate into business development. The same for big-firm lawyers. People would say, "so-and-so from this firm is now Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar." I never thought that being Chancellor would affect my

professional life that way. But there was one potential client who came into the office and said, we want a powerful lawyer and we figure that the Chancellor of the Bar must be a powerful lawyer. I laugh about that now. And ego – anybody who runs for Chancellor has a healthy ego. If you don't have one, I don't think you make the run for it. Getting elected is not an easy thing. I asked the person who said this to me about the power concept. After all, it's not like you're appointing judges. But there was the power of appointment and the power to be the voice of 14,000 members of the Philadelphia Bar Association. And notwithstanding lawyer jokes, which I cannot abide, people see lawyers as powerful people. I don't know that being Chancellor changed me. I would like to think that the year that I was Chancellor helped change the Bar. I changed the face of the Bar Association. Part of my agenda certainly was to demonstrate that there were qualified women in every level of legal practice doing every kind of legal work. When I was Chancellor-elect, I actively recruited women who had served on Bar committees to become

vice chair of that committee, so I could elevate them to chair the following year. And in 1992, more than 50 percent of the committee chairs were women. People saw that. And you couldn't go back after that. I don't know if there's 50 percent now, but you couldn't go back to only two or three. That was a lasting change of which I am very proud.

There are people for whom being Chancellor is the highlight of their life.

It's *one* of the highlights, but I don't know if I can say *the* highlight. Late in life I have a 9-year-old daughter. I would say that Sydney is the highlight of my life. But if you asked me if I'd like to be Chancellor again, I think I would. It's a great job and a great platform. You make of it what you can and what you want. You have a lot of visibility and exposure. You have a lot of opportunities to speak not just to lawyers but to the public at large. And if you have things that you want to say, you have the ability to use that exposure and say them.

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One of the things that struck me was how young you were when you became Chancellor. If you were becoming Chancellor now, would you do anything differently now that you're 20 years older? And how do you view it from the perspective of time?

What I would do differently, if I were Chancellor today, has more to do with what I see as the role of the Bar Association. When I became active in the Bar, immediately after I became a lawyer and through the time when I was Chancellor. I think the Bar Association was a far more activist organization. The Association has frequently confronted the question of the duality of its identity – are we a trade organization or a professional association? My answer was – and still is – we're both! But I think that some Chancellors lean more one way than the other. From Leon Katz and Ben Picker through me, Andre Dennis, and Larry Beaser, there was an enormous amount of participation in public policy issues. We raised and participated in the public debate about issues in city government, the school district, due process issues at

the prisons. I don't see that happening as much now and in the past few years.

Will you do it again?

No. You know...it used to be a two-year position. And every Chancellor will tell you that the year goes very fast. But the time commitment is huge. I believe I clocked 3,200 or 3,300 hours in 1992 because it was also the year that Ed Rendell became mayor and took on the city unions. Between negotiating three of the four city contracts as well as the teachers' contract, and being Chancellor, I had one day off and it was Christmas at the end of the year. I had no other commitments at the time. I worked around the clock. This was before the Internet, before smartphones, and being able to telecommute. It was hard.

Would you like your daughter to follow your path?

Well Sydney does a lot of negotiation, and she's quite good at it. Would I like her to be a lawyer? One of our partners has two kids, one a lawyer, and one a law student, and I think that is so great. Ours is a land that was built on

fundamental documents that set forth the rule of law: the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. I think you'll find the best answer to that question in my Chancellor's speech: "Without lawyers we would have no Constitution or Bill of Rights; without lawyers we would have no individual liberties or guarantees such as freedom of speech, of the press or to practice a religion; without lawyers we would not be protected against the negligence of members of other professions, fraud committed by private institutions or the excesses of over-reaching governments. Lawyers protect the public interest and private freedoms and no other profession can say the same." I spoke those words 20 years ago. I still believe deeply in them. Absolutely, I'd love it if Sydney became a lawyer!! ■

Niki T. Ingram (NTIngram@MDWCG.com), Assistant Director Workers' Compensation & Employment Law Department at Marshall, Dennehey, Warner, Coleman & Goggin, is a member of the Editorial Board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.

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