



KEEP CALM & CARRY ON

86th Chancellor
Kathleen D. Wilkinson

by Lauren A. Wilkinson

PHOTOGRAPHED BY John Carlano



Kathleen D. Wilkinson, the 86th Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, began her journey to leadership in Union, N.J., once voted an “All-American Town.” Her father, Michael Yesenko, was a history teacher at Union High School for 40 years. Her mother, Marie, had a smile that imprinted itself on everyone she met. Marie’s amiability enabled her to escape disabling health issues that started when Kathleen was a teenager. Mike was tirelessly devoted to his wife and two daughters. Her mother’s illness made Kathleen self-reliant and independent.

Kathleen’s perseverance was supported by her family’s strong work ethic and academic values, and her father’s insistence that she could do anything she wanted, including pursuing a career largely reserved to men.

“Becoming a lawyer, at that time, as a woman? That was unheard of!” said Lori Mooney, a friend since 9th grade. Although somewhat a wallflower, Mooney says Kathleen blossomed as she became involved in many student activities in high school. Very few women from Kathleen’s economic background aspired to become attorneys and there were no professional mentors or role models to prove that it was even possible. Yet, Kathleen was determined. She watched with fascination the movie “Adam’s Rib” with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy (and later the brief TV series of the same name), which featured a husband-and-wife lawyer couple who worked on the opposite sides of a case. Fiction would later become her reality.

Much of Kathleen’s fun flowed from her outgoing, younger sister, Denise. They made clothing, did artwork and wrote stories. Kathleen liked to create her own French fashion magazines and newsletters for distribution to Denise and girlfriends.

LAW SCHOOL DAYS – MET HER MATCH

Kathleen’s law school friend and current Villanova Law Professor Doris Brogan recalls how Kathleen and husband Tom first met. “It was a hot sweltering day in August 1978 when Kathleen Yesenko, Kean College graduate, took her seat in the cavernous Room 29 in the old Garey Hall,” Brogan said. “Fabled Contracts professor Ed ‘Jocko’ Collins (Villanova’s version of John Houseman) scowled from the lectern. Thomas Wilkinson, the freckled, Boston-raised high school and college tennis standout, conveniently was alphabetically assigned to sit by her in classes. The two soon became friends and study partners. Thirty-four years later, Tom and Kathleen are celebrating 27 years of marriage, three remarkable children,

32 years of practicing law in the grueling arena of litigation, and their coincidental installation as leaders of Pennsylvania’s two largest bar associations.”

“Kathleen and Tom” took some pains to keep their relationship private to avoid the gossip mill. “Everyone knew they were dating, but everyone respected their wish to keep their relationship out of the law school gossip column,” said classmate Jim Matthews. “I think Kathleen and Tom were the only ones in our class who thought their relationship was a secret,” he quipped. But their classmates honored their wish for privacy, and that in many ways reflects

the respect they had for them.

Brogan recalled that Kathleen came to Villanova with a sterling academic record, a double major in political science and education – which she completed in two and a half years – and a work ethic that had won her awards, including an invitation to the college honor fraternity, and summa cum laude honors at graduation. Kathleen knew how to multitask.

She’d rush home from day trips to the beach with friends in order to make it back to Union in time for her job at a ShopRite supermarket. But when she arrived at law school, she admitted she felt more than a little intimidated. So many students were from Ivy League schools with pre-law advisors. Many had lawyers in the family – generations of lawyers. Classmate Vincent McGuinness and Brogan remember commiserating with Kathleen. They also were from small North Jersey towns and graduates of New Jersey colleges. They wondered, “What were we thinking?”

After initial apprehension, Kathleen did what she does so well – she rolled her sleeves up, put her

head down and got the job done. Kathleen was selected to join the Law Review, was elected to the Honor Board and started writing for The Docket, the law school’s newspaper. She worked in the law library, interned with the Delaware County District Attorney’s Office and after her second year, interned with U.S. District Court Judge Charles R. Weiner. By her third year, Kathleen worked part time as a law clerk with a Philadelphia maritime firm where she later became an associate.

Classmate Dave Robbins recalls how “Kathleen did then, as she does now, offer her constant smile – not a phony smile or a superior smile, but one that comes from an honest sense of happiness.”

“But don’t mistake that charming personality for naiveté or think she is a pushover,” Brogan noted. “Kathleen has a steel will, and stands her ground with confidence and toughness.”

“My mother’s devotion to her family extends to her colleagues and affiliations; her exceptional professionalism continues to empower me.”



The Wilkinsons at historic Congress Hall in Cape May, N.J.

FAMILY

Married at the chapel at Villanova University in 1985, Kathleen and Tom have three children. Lindsey, now a first-year at Villanova Law, says her mother exemplifies the essence of candor, poise and sincerity. “My mother knew she wanted to become a lawyer in adolescence and with careful planning and lots of hard work and sacrifice, she succeeded.”

“Many of the obstacles aspiring women faced more than 30 years ago are no longer permitted in the workplace; people like my mother continue to raise the number of women partners in law firms – still only in the 20 percent range nationwide,” Lindsey said. “My mother’s devotion to her family extends to her colleagues and affiliations; her exceptional professionalism continues to empower me.” Lindsey adds that her mom is “genuinely eager to help and place herself among the people who care about initiating group discussion on issues from women in the profession, to diversity and leadership, to leading local civic associations and getting involved in community activities.”

Michael, the youngest, an 8th grader at Episcopal Academy, is his mother’s buddy. Michael was born when Kathleen was co-chair of the Women in the Profession Committee. He has grown up while his mother served

as chair of the State Civil Litigation Section, was elected member of the Board of Governors, then Assistant Secretary and later Secretary, and finally, Vice Chancellor, which led to her becoming Chancellor-Elect and Chancellor.

I’m a junior at Franklin & Marshall College, and I worked at my mother’s law firm (Wilson Elser) as a summer staff assistant for the last two years. I’ve accompanied my mother to court, conferences and bar functions and observed my mother’s work ethic – how she always remains calm, and no matter what the situation may be, she just carries on. All three of us also recall Mom going to school events, dressing up for trick or treating and accompanying us to France for school and choir trips. But to work hard, and remain cheerful, requires downtime, which Kathleen finds with her family in Cape May.

CAPE MAY ESCAPES

Always drawn to the Jersey Shore, Kathleen fell in love with Cape May because of its Victorian charm, excellent beaches and diverse community. Cape May reminded Tom of the New England beach towns where he grew up.

Beth Hyde met the Wilkinsons at a Planning Board meeting in Cape May 15 years ago. “We call the Wilkinsons

‘newcomers’ because they have been coming to Cape May for only 20 years,” said Hyde.

Even in Cape May, Kathleen is the type of person who dives right in. Hyde says Kathleen has participated in every Cape May activity. Her favorite has to be the Lima Bean Festival in West Cape May and her kids have been crowned Lima Bean queen or king.

“Kathleen joined one of the oldest civic organizations in the country, the Cape May Cottagers Association. She soon got on the board, became an officer and ultimately the second woman president for two years. Kathleen also loves the Beach Club, even if she often hides away in a corner to jump on a conference call. As long as she has the phone on mute, no one hears the waves crashing or seagulls’ cries. She absolutely loves Cape May. Cape May loves her back,” said Hyde.

A COMMITTED CLIENT ADVOCATE

Kathleen has been with Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker LLP, one of the largest litigation defense firms in the nation, since 1984. She steadily rose to become one of the firm’s first women equity partners. She also has built a stellar reputation through her diverse practice, which includes defending high-exposure



products liability cases, including mass torts, construction matters, defense of insurance professionals and complex business litigation. Kathleen has been appointed as judge pro tem and special master because she has the respect of the bench and the bar.

Drawing upon her experience at Villanova, classmate Paul Dougherty has noted how “Kathleen has become a leader in an area of the law traditionally populated by men – construction and products liability. Her perseverance and determination have won her cases, but more importantly, the respect and admiration of her partners, colleagues, clients and adversaries.”

Dona File, corporate safety director of L.F. Driscoll Company, has worked with Kathleen for nearly 20 years on many serious construction cases involving personal injury. “No one is tougher than Kathleen in the trenches, having defended (and won I might add) many cases against the most successful attorneys in Philadelphia. She relishes visiting construction sites for firsthand research and uses her strategic thinking in a deposition to her greatest advantage,” notes File.

Rick Strouse, vice president and general counsel for The Phillies, has worked with Kathleen on a number of cases over the years that arose out of the construction of Citizens Bank Park.

“Kathleen has done a wonderful job handling those construction cases for The Phillies and she has achieved great results for us,” Strouse said. “Kathleen is a ‘team player.’ She is very creative in her approach to the defense of complex cases and she is a force to be reckoned with, whether she is handling a site inspection, defending a deposition or advocating in the courtroom,” he said.

Kathleen has done all of this while working full time, raising three children and moving up the ranks at Wilson Elser as well as the Bar Association. Juggling is not always easy, Kathleen has said, telling stories of how she had to bring me as an 8-month-old baby to a deposition of an insurance broker. My presence was duly noted on the deposition transcript.

“Since we met as young associates at the firm, Kathleen and I have been the dearest of friends, the most trusted of confidants, as well as each other’s mentor and personal cheerleader,” says law partner Shelli Fedullo. Kathy and I have decades of shared memories and have racked up a fair amount of ‘non-billable’ hours devoted to laughter. Over the years we have taken turns being ‘Lucy’ to the other’s ‘Ethel.’”

Fedullo adds how many would be surprised to learn that Kathleen’s wardrobe includes steel-toed shoes that she wears with her hardhat when

she visits construction sites, sometimes within only hours after an accident.

THE LEADER

U.S. District Court Senior Judge Norma L. Shapiro observes, “Kathleen Wilkinson is the 86th Philadelphia Bar Association Chancellor but only the sixth woman attorney to hold the position. It is fitting that she will serve as our 2013 leader because of her long, effective service to many bar groups and her successful leadership in so many bar activities. She will be a credit to the Bar Association and the Philadelphia community.”

Kathleen serves on numerous pro bono boards, with her dedication to public service having been instilled at an early age. She is committed to maintaining the organized bar’s relevance to lawyers of diverse backgrounds, women lawyers and young lawyers. She often speaks at naturalization ceremonies at the federal courthouse, welcoming the newest citizens to the American family, and sharing with them that just one of her four grandparents was born in the United States. Her family’s background is Irish, Scottish, German and Austrian.

Since law school, Kathleen has promoted women in the profession and has worked at both the local and state bar levels, including supporting

part-time and alternative work options within the Bar Association and also at Wilson Elser. Kathleen received the Pennsylvania Bar Association's Anne X. Alpern Award in 2008, the highest award given to a Pennsylvania woman attorney, in recognition of her accomplishments as a woman litigator and for her leadership in mentoring and inspiring other women attorneys. This fall she was invited to speak at the inaugural "Fill Her Shoes" event at Villanova Law, a pipeline program designed to mentor women considering careers in law.

Kathleen also has always been a mentor to young lawyers, law students and law interns from Lyon, France. A founding member of the Villanova Law J. Willard O'Brien American Inn of Court (named after her torts professor and then dean of Villanova Law), she served as the Inn's first woman president.

Kathleen has worked with many members of the judiciary, in sections and committees of the bar, and on CLE programs.

Justice James J. Fitzgerald III has known Kathleen in many different capacities. "I have worked closely with Kathleen in administrative, educational and civic endeavors. I am impressed with the knowledge, enthusiasm, civility and dignity that Kathleen exhibits in skillfully combining the talents of many people to accomplish important goals," he said.

A GREAT YEAR AHEAD

According to Brogan, Kathleen remains today the person her law school classmates described: a wonderful colleague – ambitious and accomplished – who cares deeply for others, and whose constant smile reflects her own genuine happiness with who she is, where she has gone and the choices she has made." Today, former law classmates Vincent McGuinness and Kathleen's husband Tom practice together as partners at Cozen O'Connor where they regularly interface as members of firm management. "There was no doubt in my mind that Tom and Kathleen would soar in their careers," said McGuinness. "No one doubted they would become a Pennsylvania power couple, yet it is amazing that



Kathleen relaxes in her Cape May, N.J. home.



Tom and Kathleen at Independence Hall.



The family – Lauren, Tom, Kathleen, Lindsey and Michael – gather at Tom’s installation as President of the Pennsylvania Bar Association.

they ascended to the top leadership positions of the states’ two largest bar associations at the same time – a first in the Commonwealth and perhaps the nation” – a 2013 version of Kathleen’s vision from the movie “Adam’s Rib.”

Tom, president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, knows that his wife is driven to succeed as a bar leader and will work very hard on behalf of the members of the Philadelphia Bar Association as Chancellor. “Kathleen will speak on every panel, CLE program and seminar if it will help other lawyers reach their personal

and professional goals. Kathleen will do her best to actively participate and contribute at every meeting, event, reception and fundraiser for the benefit of lawyers, nonprofit legal aid services and their clients. She has developed excellent relationships with all facets of the bench and bar, both in the city and statewide, which will help her to hit the ground running in January.”

Tom knows better than anyone how much his wife does. “She must have her coffee in the morning and she then runs like the Energizer bunny all day until she is exhausted. We know

she has stopped working when she has fallen asleep at night – that is the telltale signal that her Blackberry can be pried from her hand.” Kathleen will make every moment count and will lead and serve the legal profession and Philadelphia community with grace and dignity. ■

Lauren A. Wilkinson is a junior at Franklin & Marshall College and the daughter of Chancellor Kathleen D. Wilkinson.

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