

# Back in the day, she often ate lunch alone

Boyd: Stewart has been ‘an inspiration and mentor’ to many

**GEOFF KIRBYSON**

When Janet Stewart was a young lawyer, she often ate lunch by herself.

Lawyers might “do” lunch more than any other professionals today but back in the late 1960s and early ’70s, she was the only female lawyer at the London, Ont., office of her firm, Lerner’s LLP.

“I used to think, ‘wouldn’t it be nice to have somebody to have lunch with?’ None of the guys ever asked me to have lunch with them,” she says.

“The guys always had buddies, buddies they did sports with or talked about files with. Women, we were so few they could ignore us quite happily. Now there are so many women in the profession that they have (female) buddies that I never had in my early law years.”

Envious? Not on your life. Ecstatic is more like it. Stewart is proud to note the number of women now among the best in the business and working on monster deals and cases. As a long-time advocate for women in the legal profession, she’ll even allow herself a slight pat on the back for the role she has played.

Her Osgoode Hall graduating class of 1968 counted but eight women out of 200 students. After articling at Fraser &

Beatty in Toronto, she joined Lerner’s as an associate. She became a partner in 1972 and worked her way up to managing partner from 1991 to 2007. During that time, the firm grew from 25 lawyers to more than 100. She was also appointed Queen’s Counsel in 1985.

Stewart remembers being called to the bar on a Friday in 1969 and after starting her job at Lerner’s the following Monday, thought she’d be there for a “year or two.

“Life has a way of changing your plans,” she says.

As managing partner, she made a point of trying to keep women active in the firm, but not everyone wanted to stay.

“Part of our succession plan was to make sure we kept women and had them succeed. We let them take time off to have children and come back,” she says.

Despite her work, Stewart bristles when asked about being an “advocate” for women lawyers for so many years.

“Advocate sounds pretentious. When there were opportunities for the women lawyers to show off and give speeches, I would promote them to do so. That’s how I advocated for women in law,” she says.

“Women were in the minority and were being discriminated against. It was difficult for

women to become partners of law firms. Trying to keep women active in the profession

was a challenge. The sheer fact so many more women were being admitted to law school helped the cause because there was a critical mass. We didn’t look unique any longer. For a long time, I was introduced as someone in a non-traditional job. That is certainly not the case anymore.”

Virtually all of the male lawyers that Stewart knows have worked alongside women colleagues for many years. While it’s largely a gender-neutral profession on the front lines, she says there’s still a ways to go in the senior ranks.

She is quick to note that part of the challenge on this front is that women come in and out of the profession much more than men do, primarily because they’re having children and taking time off. Most firms are male-heavy at the partner level but she believes that will change.

“It will as long we can keep women in the practice. A lot of them find the hours are not conducive to a balanced domestic life,” she says.

Stewart was recognized for all of her advocacy efforts, not to mention a stellar career as a commercial and estate lawyer, at the Call to the Bar ceremony



in London on June 18, when an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws was bestowed upon her.

"That was totally unexpected. I was on vacation and when I got back I read the e-mail about it. 'Wow,' I thought to myself. 'Where did all that come from?' Humble country lawyers like me don't usually get things like honorary doctors of laws," she says.

Marion Boyd, a partner at Boyd/Dunlop-Addley & Associates Inc. who was appointed a bencher of the Law Society of Upper Canada in 2007, addressed the convocation before Stewart received her degree.

"Janet Stewart entered the legal profession at a time when it was still considered a non-traditional career choice for women. She has been an inspiration and mentor to more than two generations of lawyers, both men and women, not only at (Lerners) but in the legal community at large," she says.

"Her service to the profession has been matched by her service to the community, evidenced by her membership on numerous community organizations and charities. (She) is deserving of the highest honour this society can bestow."

Stewart also made her mark philanthropically. She was one

of the founders of Big Sisters in London in 1974 (now known as Big Brothers Big Sisters) and served on its board for a quarter century. She has also served as a director on the London Community Foundation and the London Health Sciences Centre Foundation.

"I never got on a board I didn't have some passion for. A lot of people do it to put something on their resumés to show they're community-minded. I've never been one of those. You should have some interest in the causes. It was a great way to meet people. I generally enjoyed what the organizations did and the people who did it," she says.

Stewart got the odd piece of work through her charitable connections but she never sought it out.

"I never think anybody should expect charitable work to result in a whole lot of legal work coming to them. It may, but it shouldn't be why you do it," she says.

Today, Stewart works a more relaxed schedule, coming into the office three or four days a week. She still sees new clients but she's doing third-generation work, too.

"If you're around long enough, you meet families of parents, children and grandchildren," she says.

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