

WOMEN

— IN THE —

PROFESSION

Women in the Profession. Since 1916, women lawyers in Mississippi have made themselves known. It was at that time that newspaper headlines proclaimed, “First Girl Lawyer is Admitted to Supreme Court of Mississippi” when Susie Blue Buchanan took the oath to practice law. This made her the first woman lawyer ever qualified to practice before the highest court in Mississippi. As the twentieth century moved towards its end and we entered the twenty-first century, women came into their own, not just as members but as leaders in the profession.

You will read on the following pages about the past fourteen women lawyers who have received the Susie Blue Buchanan Award since 1999. This award honors an outstanding woman in the profession who has achieved professional excellence and has actively paved the way to success for other women lawyers. You will understand clearly the reasons these female lawyers were selected as Susie Blue Award recipients.

The story of these women lawyers is not simply of their accomplishments, but it is a story of women lawyers who demonstrated and continue to demonstrate their dedication to the legal system. This is a tribute to these fourteen women lawyers and Judges, but also to the thousands of women lawyers in Mississippi who daily serve the public and legal profession in our state. ■



*By Amanda Green Alexander
Editor, The Mississippi Lawyer*



Judge Sharion Aycock, *Aberdeen*

It was a mere suggestion from a professor at the University of Mississippi that would ultimately lay the groundwork for the exceptional legal career of Judge Sharion Aycock—the first woman to be nominated and confirmed as United States district court judge from the state of Mississippi. “It’s fair to say that I had not given much thought to going to law school,” she said, recalling that she considered taking the LSAT only after it was offered as a suggestion. “I always assumed I would return to our family business.”

One class was all it took, though, and Aycock was hooked. “I absolutely fell in love with law school and the study of law,” she said. “It captured me.”

Sworn in to her current position on October 26, 2007, Aycock was unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate after being vetted for nearly a year. In announcing her appointment, Senator Thad Cochran said: “The Mississippi legal community has long recognized Judge Aycock’s competence as a practitioner and as a judge. Judge Aycock has earned the respect and admiration of her fellow lawyers and judges who have worked with her and who know her well. She will serve on the federal bench with great distinction.”

Aycock credits 22 years of private practice in her rural hometown of Fulton for laying a foundation that would position her well for public service. “It threw me into public service, which I absolutely love,” she said. Prior to her federal appointment, Aycock served as circuit court judge for the First Circuit Court District.

Aycock also humbly appreciates the faith others have had in her ability and the opportunities that have existed during an era characterized by efforts to bring more diversity to the bench. Looking ahead, Aycock plans to “keep learning.” She will become chief judge of the Northern District in 2014, opening up a new realm of administrative duties and leadership opportunities.



Deborah H. Bell, *Oxford*

Deborah Bell has a passion for students. A professor at the University of Mississippi School of Law since 1981 as well as a visiting professor at Ohio State and Emory University, Bell has found her niche in bringing the realities of the legal profession to the education setting.

“I love working with students on cases or projects, where learning happens in reaction to a real-world setting,” she said. “It’s challenging and messy—like law practice—and teaches substantive law, procedure, professional responsibility and lawyering skills all at once.”

Bell helped establish the Civil Legal Clinic at University of Mississippi School of Law, a program where students serve as lead attorneys, working under the direct supervision of experienced lawyers. As one of the initiatives that Bell has most valued over the course of her career, the program’s goal is to teach skills that are essential to the competent practice of law. Equally important to her is the role she has played in founding and directing the new Pro Bono Initiative at the university to address community legal needs by having students put legal education into practice.

Focusing primarily on family and poverty law in the classroom, Bell said that she has learned a great deal over the years doing CLEs and working with practicing lawyers and judges. “They understand how family law actually works,” she noted, adding that she loved the five-years of research and writing that produced *Bell on Mississippi Family Law*, a definitive reference work on divorce, custody, child support, and all things family law in Mississippi.

A graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law magna cum laude, Bell said that she was drawn to the profession in the 1970s because she believed it would offer a range of options where one could become involved in addressing social problems. It was also an exciting time for women in the profession as the field was still a new frontier.

Patricia W. Bennett, *Jackson*

Trial law is not for the faint of heart. Just ask Patricia Bennett, who made a name for herself in the courtroom for her ability to successfully prosecute difficult criminal cases—including violent crimes and a number of high-profile cases that received state-wide and national attention.

Bennett's legacy to women lawyers and contributions to the field have definitely proven that there is a place for women as lead counsel in a courtroom. The late Carol West summed it up this way when presenting Bennett as Susie Blue Buchanan Award winner: "She wanted the judge, other trial lawyers and lay persons on the jury to recognize and appreciate the fact that women could be superb in positions traditionally occupied by men. She also wanted other women lawyers to be encouraged and motivated by what she was doing....Most important, she wanted to prove that women could be an able advocate and successful in trials against some of the best men trial lawyers in the state."

A 1979 graduate of the Mississippi College School of Law, Bennett has held such positions as special assistant attorney general for the state justice department, assistant district attorney for Hinds and Yazoo counties as well as the Southern District of Mississippi. She also served as a member of the Judge Advocate General's Corps with the Mississippi Army National Guard Reserve and the U.S. Army Reserve, handling cases ranging from theft and assault on military bases to soldiers going AWOL. She briefly became a judge when she served a term as a special circuit judge for the Hinds County Drug Court Diversion Program.

A professor at the Mississippi College School of Law since 1989 (tenured in 1994), Bennett brings real-world experience to the classroom as one of the school's most respected teachers. She has also served as a visiting professor for the Harvard Law School Trial Advocacy Program, Emory University School of Law Trial Techniques Program and University of Arkansas School of Law.

Kay B. Cobb, *Oxford*

When Kay Cobb enrolled in the University of Mississippi School of Law shortly after her family moved to Oxford in 1975, a legal career seemed like a logical move. Believing a law degree would open up many options to her, Cobb graduated in 1978 and set out to begin what would become decades of distinguished service.

The second woman to serve on the Mississippi Supreme Court, she was the third-longest serving justice when she retired in 2007. By seniority, she served as a presiding justice over three-judge panels of the court to decide cases. She also served as state senator for District 9 from 1992 to 1996.

Cobb began her career practicing law in Oxford until 1982, when she became director of prosecutor programs at the Mississippi Prosecutors College within the University of Mississippi School of Law. She later served as senior attorney for the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics as well as an instructor at the Mississippi Law Enforcement Officers Training Academy. She established a North Mississippi regional office as special assistant attorney general and served as state coordinator for the State Wide Education, Enforcement and Prevention System (SWEEPS) program, where she was responsible for community mobilization in drug education and prevention efforts.

When Cobb retired from the Supreme Court, Chief Justice Smith was quoted saying, "Presiding Justice Cobb has been invaluable in her service to the Court, to the state of Mississippi, and especially to me during my tenure as chief justice. I have never seen a more dedicated public servant who is committed to justice and fairness to all people. Justice Cobb is meticulous and very studious. She works harder than any other justice I've ever known."





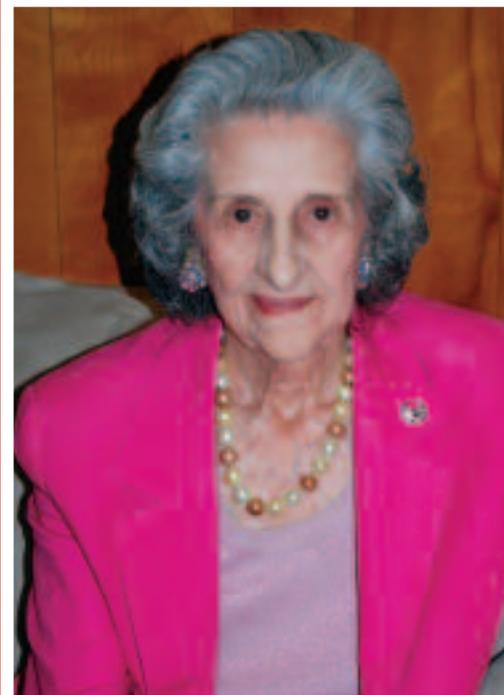
The late Evelyn Gandy, *Hattiesburg*

The late Evelyn Gandy will be remembered by many as an individual who opened more doors for women in Mississippi than any other of her era. Her efforts challenged the societal institutions of the day and blazed a trail for women to be treated with respect and equality in every area of society.

A dynamic speaker from a young age, Gandy addressed audiences for political candidates in high school and later won the state oratorical contest while a law student at the University of Mississippi. Her political aspirations took her straight to the U.S. Senate following graduation where she served three years as a legislative assistant. From there, her pioneering spirit led her to complete a successful campaign to become the first woman to represent Forrest County in the state legislature, where she supported progressive legislation in the areas of education and human services.

That election was not the only “first” in Gandy’s remarkable resume. Appointed as the first woman to fill the role of assistant attorney general in Mississippi in 1959, she was elected state treasurer the same year as the first woman to hold a state-wide constitutional office. Other firsts include her appointments as the first woman to serve as commissioner of public welfare and insurance commissioner. She would later serve as the first woman Lieutenant Governor in 1975.

Gandy’s career spanned nearly six decades before her passing in 2007. Her life of public service has been heralded and recognized on state and national levels through such awards as the Lindy Boggs Award (Southern Women in Political Science), Susie Blue Buchanan Award (Women in the Profession Committee of The Mississippi Bar), Margaret Brent Award (American Bar Association) and the Lifetime Distinguished Service Award (The Mississippi Bar).



Clare Sekul Hornsby, *Biloxi*

The esteemed legal career of Clare Sekul Hornsby could easily be characterized as “timeless.” A practicing attorney since the completion of her juris doctor degree in 1945, Hornsby is perfectly content to continue her Biloxi-based practice that has existed since graduation. As president of Sekul, Hornsby and Tisdale law firm, she noted that she delights in the ability to “wake up every day and know that all my children and family are here, and then, of course, to be able to practice the profession I love.”

And who could ask for a better future than that, she asks? Crediting her parents for helping her find her passion for the law, she said that law school was simply an act of obedience to their desires for her future. Immigrants from Yugoslavia, Hornsby recalled that they believed law to be a noble profession for her and her older brother. “Lucky for me my parents knew me better than I knew myself, because I have loved the law since the first day of classes,” she noted.

Over her career, Hornsby has served in the Chancery Court of the Second Judicial District of Harrison County as a Master, the Mississippi Women’s Cabinet on Public Affairs and as a referee in Harrison County Family Court. She is distinguished as the first woman president of the Harrison County Bar Association.

Although her practice started in criminal law, she later gravitated to family law, where she believes some of her greatest achievements have occurred in the area of adoptions. “It just does my heart good to know that I am helping to place a child with a family that will love them,” she said. Family is very important to Hornsby who has four children, nine grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. She was married to Warren Hornsby from 1946 until his passing in September of 1996.

Justice Ann H. Lamar, *Senatobia*

Following graduation from the University of Mississippi in 1982, Ann Lamar's career aspirations were focused on operating a small-town law practice with her husband in Senatobia. And while that marked the start of her career, the legal field had entirely different plans for Lamar.

Elected as the third woman to serve on the Mississippi Supreme Court in 2009, Lamar's career spanning more than three decades has encompassed such positions as circuit court judge in the 17th Circuit Court District, district attorney for the 17th District and assistant district attorney. According to Lamar, she could have never predicted the journey.

"It's been a great run," she said, noting that many of the role changes throughout her career occurred without her foresight. "It's kind of come in leaps and bounds often taking me by surprise. You could put me back in any position I have held, and I would be happy."

Lamar pointed to the establishment of the 17th Circuit Drug Court under her tenure as circuit judge as one of her greatest achievements. The successful endeavor has become a model program for other court systems looking to address the revolving door effect of substance abuse in the legal system. "I have gotten a tremendous amount of satisfaction from making real changes in people's lives," she said.

Following in the footsteps of her father, the late Chancery Judge Leon Hannaford, Lamar chose the legal field in the 1970s when there were not near as many women seeking career paths as lawyers. Since that time, she noted that the field has expanded to offer tremendous opportunity for women today.

As Lamar completes an eight-year term on the Mississippi Supreme Court, she said that she plans to keep her options open. "I've just quit making plans," she laughed. "I plan to take life as it comes."



Mary Libby Payne, *Pearl*

When Mary Libby Payne retired more than a decade ago, her influence had touched nearly every aspect of the legal landscape of Mississippi—from private practice and academia to the bench and all three branches of state government. And since that time, she has continued to build a heritage of service as a public servant, advocate for women's issues, motivational speaker and Christian leader.

One of 11 recipients of the Mississippi Medal of Service in 2011 for significant contributions to the state, Payne was the only female lawyer to receive the national Christian Legal Society's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002 and the second woman to receive the Mississippi Bar's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005.

Payne was one of the original members of the Mississippi Court of Appeals and was the first woman to serve on the court. Over the course of her very active and successful career, she was a legislative draftsman, executive director of the Mississippi Judiciary Commission and assistant state attorney general. Prior to her election to the Court of Appeals, she was a professor of law and founding dean of the Mississippi College School of Law.

When Payne started school at Mississippi University of Women, her sights were set on a ballet career, but she said God had other plans for her. In coverage of her 2001 retirement, she was quoted saying, "It was in July 1951 at Johnson Springs in Ridgecrest Baptist Assembly, in the prayer garden that I really felt God's call to the ministry of jurisprudence. I'm not sure how the Holy Spirit speaks to everybody. But in my heart I knew that day that this was what was God's will for my life."

Payne resides in Pearl with her husband of more than 55 years. She recently chronicled the complex story behind the history of the Mississippi College School of Law titled *A Goodly Heritage*.





Joy Lambert Phillips, *Gulfport*

Along with many notable career achievements, Joy Phillips is distinguished as the first female president of The Mississippi Bar, the first corporate bar president and the organization's 100th president. Equal to the opportunities that her tenure brought to the association were the challenges that she faced when Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the Mississippi coast six weeks after being sworn in.

"It was my honor and privilege to have led The Mississippi Bar during this trying time," she recalled, adding that the event touched her on a very personal level as someone who lives and works in the city of Gulfport. "The far-reaching impact of the pro-bono legal assistance desks at the FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers was a true credit to the caring nature of our legal profession."

Phillips' legal career has been primarily focused in the practice of commercial litigation and banking law. Following a period of time working in the city of Jackson, her career moved to Gulfport, where she served as a partner with Allen, Vaughn, Cobb and Hood before taking a position with Hancock Holding Company in 1999. Ten years later, she was promoted to executive vice president of the company and was then designated as corporate secretary in 2011.

Having the opportunity to work with the Mississippi Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission (ATJC) has been one of the highlights of Phillip's career, one that she takes very seriously. As one of the original co-chairs appointed by the court in 2006, she still serves on the commission to ensure that the less fortunate have access to the judicial system.

Crediting much of her career success to inspiration and encouragement provided by her mother, Phillips recalls being told at a young age that girls could be anything they wanted—even doctors and lawyers—and "not to let anyone tell her otherwise." Looking ahead, Phillips hopes to keep learning on the job following Hancock's large acquisition of Whitney Holding Company in 2011.



Lenore L. Prather, *Columbus*

When the Carroll Gartin Justice Building was dedicated in 2011, the portraits of four historic Mississippi Supreme Court justices were unveiled to grace its walls including the state's first female justice—Lenore Prather. Appointed to the high court in 1982, Prather was known for her work to improve the integrity of the judiciary. Her leadership was also instrumental in bringing the new home of the Mississippi Supreme Court and Court of Appeals to fruition.

"I was honored and considered it my privilege to have a fulfilling career in public service," Prather noted. "When I left the Supreme Court, I was proud of a number of accomplishments during my time as chief justice. By that time, the funding was secure, and plans were in place for the construction of the new Carroll Gartin Justice Building, which I believe will provide a fitting home for those who strive for justice for all Mississippians."

Prior to her appointment to the Mississippi Supreme Court, Prather served as chancery judge for the 14th Chancery District, consisting of Lowndes, Clay, Oktibbeha, Noxubee, Webster and Chickasaw counties. Like her Supreme Court appointment, she was also the first woman to hold the chancellorship in Mississippi.

"Based on my experiences as a chancellor, I was pleased to have the opportunity to advance chancery law with regard to the equitable distribution of marital assets in divorce and determining child custody based on the best interest of children," she said, recalling a notable achievement from her legal career spanning more than five decades.

Prior to her appointments to chancery judge and Mississippi Supreme Court Justice, Prather held a private practice until she was appointed as municipal judge in West Point. After leaving the Supreme Court, Justice Prather served as interim president of Mississippi University for Women in Columbus and was awarded an honorary doctorate degree.

A recipient of numerous accolades over the course of her career, Prather has also held esteemed positions as mother of three daughters and grandmother of two grandchildren.

Lydia M. Quarles, *Starkville*

The 2011 winner of the Susie Blue Buchanan Award, Lydia Quarles has long been a proponent of women's legal and economic issues and has worked diligently to engage women in politics at every level—local, state and national.

"We have learned from the European Union that a legislative body comprised of 30% women can make a perspective shift," she said. "We need to continue to work to achieve that shift in the US."

And that is precisely what Quarles intends to do as she continues to operate a thriving private practice and engage in government and academic initiatives through her position as a senior policy analyst with Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University.

It was Quarles' aim to pursue a legal career since her earliest memories. "My mom says that when I was five and we lived across the street from Cumberland Law School, I told her that I was going to read every book in the library," she recalled.

Following post graduate work in public policy and administration and a period of time clerking for the Alabama Supreme Court, Quarles' career path led her to private practice until she was appointed administrative judge with the MS Workers' Compensation Commission. She served in that position for more than eight years and was then appointed commissioner of the MS Workers' Compensation Commission.

A Fellow of the Mississippi Bar, Quarles has also been honored with the Bar's Distinguished Service Award and the Joan Fiss Bishop Award from the American Society of Public Administration. She believes that some of her greatest career accomplishments have occurred through the success of the Kids' Chance Mediation Project and her time spent mentoring young women lawyers. She served as the Women in the Profession Committee Chair from 2005 to 2007.



Constance Slaughter-Harvey, *Forest*

When Constance Slaughter-Harvey enrolled as a scholarship recipient at Tougaloo College, she had dreamed of such careers as becoming a missionary or physician. It was not until a defining moment occurred in her life that all paths pointed to the legal profession, and it began with an introduction to civil rights leader Medgar Evers.

"Six days after I met him, he was murdered," she recalled. "That caused me to change my outlook on life and how I could help bring about change for the better."

Graduating from the University of Mississippi in 1970 as the first African-American woman to receive a law degree from the institution, Slaughter-Harvey became a strong advocate of civil rights beginning with her employment with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, where she represented the families of two students brutalized by highway patrolmen. She has held such positions as president of the Magnolia Bar Association, the first African-American judge in Mississippi and the first African-American and woman to be elected president of the National Association of Election Directors.

Her resume includes a long history of dedication to civil rights, but two career achievements particularly stand out for Slaughter-Harvey as proud moments during her tenure as assistant secretary of state for elections and public lands. These include her part in the efforts to successfully lobby for mail-in voter registration and the reform of the Sixteenth Section School and Public Trust Lands. She also pointed to the success of the highway patrol desegregation lawsuit, *Morrow vs. Crisler* as a notable achievement.

Memorable career moments aside, Slaughter-Harvey emphasized that her greatest life achievement has been the privilege of becoming a mother and grandmother. "The older I get, the more I realize how precious that part of life is," she said. "It requires more skill than any part of my law practice."

Now retired from private practice, Slaughter-Harvey serves as president for both the Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation and the W.L. Slaughter Memorial Foundation.





Carolyn Ellis Staton, *Oxford*

When Carolyn Staton completed law school in 1972, the legal profession was not a typical career path for women. Undaunted, Staton studied at Yale Law School determined to follow in the footsteps of her two older brothers. “I thought it would be a good way to serve the community, helping people solve their problems,” she said.

With a newly-acquired law degree, a previously-completed masters degree and a stint teaching on the high school level under her belt, Staton set out to find her niche in the legal field. “Ultimately I realized that I loved the intellectual challenge of the law, but I also loved teaching. So the idea of going into law teaching seemed a natural move,” she recalled.

And the rest is history. In 2009, Staton retired from the University of Mississippi after 32 years of employment at the institution holding positions ranging from professor and interim dean of the law school to provost and vice chancellor of academic affairs. “My career had been very stimulating and very fulfilling, and at times, very demanding,” she said. “I wanted time to explore other things—interests that I had put on the shelf for years.” Most recently, Staton has turned her passion for books into an antiquarian book business.”

Staton noted that the opportunity to teach others about law has been her greatest experience and achievement in the field. Looking ahead, she believes that the cost of education will be one of the greatest challenges to the legal profession. “I am heartened by the current national conversation about reducing the course work to two years. Obviously, students can’t take every course that might be useful to them, even in three years,” she reasoned. “The thing we need to do is focus on legal research, legal writing, and legal reasoning. The third year could be an apprenticeship of sorts, whether done in law school clinics or internships.”



The late Carol C. West, *Jackson*

Touted for her tremendous legacy of encouragement, motivation and advocacy for the advancement of women lawyers, the late Carol West is also remembered by those in the legal field as someone who persevered and excelled with all tasks she undertook. And some of those tasks were momentous.

Following her graduation from law school at the University of Mississippi, she was immediately identified as an individual with the talent and know-how to develop—from scratch—the Legislative Reference Library for the state of Mississippi. A task never undertaken in the state before, West successfully organized and ran the first reference library until she was asked to complete the same task at the newly-established Mississippi College School of Law. By the time she reached full tenure at the institution, the law library contained 228,886 volumes, a staff of ten persons and a computer lab with fifteen computers.

As a faculty member at Mississippi College, West was one of the originators of the Women Students’ Bar Association, serving as faculty advisor for more than twenty years and often welcoming students into her home. She is remembered as a hands-on mentor to women lawyers, a strong ally and friend. During West’s introduction for the Susie Blue Buchanan Award, Mary Libby Payne said, “I know of few professors who have been as active in helping to place graduates in positions of significance, not only in law firms but also in government offices where she has enormous contacts. Also, she, perhaps more than any of the faculty members or former faculty members, follows up on the whereabouts and lives of graduates long after they have become alumni.”

Nina Stubblefield Tollison, 2010-2011 Mississippi Bar president, fondly recalled the encouragement offered to her by West and her commitment to her students. “When I was elected president of the Bar, she sent me an email that stated, ‘I am so, so, so excited for you. Know that I will help you in any way that I can.’”