

TWO WOMEN'S WOMEN
AND
LAWYERS' LAWYERS
by Sal Martoche

Growing up, I often heard the expression, "He's a man's man." As I recall, it was always used to express admiration and respect for a man who had been a leader in some way, shape or form. Sometimes, it was in sports or politics, or some other significant venue. I never heard the expression, "She's a woman's woman." And frankly, I'm not certain I would have understood what it meant.

I rarely heard someone express those same feelings of respect and admiration toward women who had accomplished great things beyond their home and family. In today's world, so much is different. This is one of those changes that is long overdue. When we look back in history and see the mountains that were placed in the paths of women who sought greater roles in society, we see that those who were able to climb the Mt. Everests in their paths had to be extraordinary.

I practiced law in Western New York for many years and I sat as a judge for many more, giving me a vantage point to witness firsthand the positive impact women have had for the better in the administration of fair and just legal representation. It is noteworthy that many of these women were first generation Italian Americans.

As a young lawyer, as I matured in my practice and when I married a strong woman and began to raise daughters, I came to realize that, for generations, we had failed as a society to take advantage of more than 50 per cent of the brainpower in the world. It struck me then and it strikes me now as a tragic waste of talent and opportunity, not only for women but for men as well. Women's perspectives are slightly different and add a different voice at the table.

Two women at the forefront of the extraordinary



Maryann Saccomando Freedman, 1986

strides in the legal profession who serve as role models are Maryann Saccomando Freedman and the late Grace Marie Ange. Both had to manage disrespect, sexism and condescension on their roads to success. Each handled these challenges admirably, though differently.

If you ever met the two of them, you would immediately note a significant difference in style. Grace Marie was direct and, at times, terse, but always stood up for herself and her clients. Maryann is softer, friendlier and more diplomatic. These two were in the vanguard of change. They became great friends when they met at the University of Buffalo law school. Grace Marie was in the class of '57 and a recent graduate of the University

of Rochester in her home town. Maryann was a year behind in the class of '58, having started in the UB undergraduate program. They were two of only 13 women in the entire law school at the time. They had to work harder, be more disciplined and strive to gain the respect of a group of skeptical males, including classmates and even certain professors. These two women became friends instantly and remained so throughout their lives.

Grace Marie went on to become one of the very first successful female criminal trial lawyers in New York State, working alongside the legendary John Condon for many years. Eventually, she struck out on her own and became an extremely successful matrimonial law specialist. One lawyer I know referred to Grace Marie as a force of nature, and she had the results to prove it, he said.

Rose Ciotta, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and a trail-blazer in her own right, told me about a group of Italian-American professional women, The National Organization of Italian American Women (NOIAW), organized by Maryann, Grace Marie, Rose, Rose Argenio and others. One of the group's first speakers was the late Representative Geraldine Ferraro. Rose Ciotta recalls that Grace Marie whipped up her specialty dish of pasta alfredo for dinner at her home for Ferraro and this group two weeks before Ferraro's vice-presidential nomination. Rose's description of that event made me realize that, in addition to being hard chargers in the legal profession, these two and others like them had the additional responsibility of running a household.

Her friend Maryann, who served as a law clerk to Justice William J. Ostrowski for many years, also had the good fortune to work alongside her husband and law partner Robert P. Freedman for many more. She is practicing with the law firm of Cohen & Lombardo to this day. This extraordinary woman in 1980 became the first female



Grace Marie Ange, circa 1957

president of the Bar Association of Erie County; the extent of this accomplishment cannot be overstated. The bar association was overwhelmingly male-dominated but, to its credit, her colleagues looked at her qualifications and decided she was the best person for the job, male or female.

If that accomplishment wasn't enough, she went on to become the first women president of the New York State Bar Association, an even more astonishing feat. With these two successes, she overcame not only embedded gender discrimination but also geographic discrimination as president of the New York State bar, overcoming the "downstate" bias and power inherent in so many organizations in New York State. In addition, she became the first woman president of the New York State Bar Foundation, the charitable arm of the state bar.

Maryann's championing of women and their roles in society sometimes caught the headlines. During her tenure as president of the Erie County bar, she was scheduled to attend at one of Buf-

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falo's most venerable private clubs a luncheon marking the establishment of new courtrooms in Buffalo. When she attempted to enter through the main entrance, she was stopped by an individual advising her she was required to enter through the "women's entrance." She left rather than attend the luncheon.

At the time, as she explained to a colleague, Joseph D. Bermingham, she knew she represented 3500 colleagues and could not abide this affront to her as their representative. Her actions were responsible for changing this antiquated practice. At the time, this quiet and respectful act of protest sent shock waves through the old-line Buffalo establishment. Her influence and guidance have been instrumental in the success of many women to follow, including her daughter, Erie County Family Court Judge Brenda Freedman. Any single one of these accomplishments would have secured her place in the pantheon of great lawyers in Western New York, but all of them and so many more are just head-shaking.

She and Grace Marie were two of a group of six women that also included Hon. Marjorie C. Mix, Mary Dee Martoche, Esq., Sue Gardner, Esq., and Hon. M. Dolores Denman in establishing an organization called simply "The Women's Group." Today, almost 40 years later, the group is thriving and continues to support networking and mentoring opportunities for women in Western New York across all professions.

Legendary journalist and public relations expert Mary Ann Lauricella recounted an anecdote that Grace Marie delighted in telling to fellow members of the group. When someone asked Grace Marie's young son John if he planned to become an attorney, he responded with great disbelief, saying, "I am NOT a girl." According to Mary Ann, Grace Marie had modeled her profession so adeptly that her son had concluded being an attorney required being a woman. Today, he is a well-respected attorney who partnered with

his mother until her retirement. Their collaboration and John's career achievement brought his mother great satisfaction and joy.

These two women somehow found time to travel the world together. They loved one another's company. Unfortunately for all of us, Grace Marie Ange passed away on December 21, 2020, after falling victim to Covid-19. As Dan Herbeck, reporter for the Buffalo News, wrote in quoting John Ange, his mother told him, "Men were in charge of everything and I needed to stand up for myself," which she did admirably. Hon. Brenda Freedman, in the same article, recalled her godmother as a mentor and role model with sparkle and pizzazz.

Is it any wonder that they were recognized together as two women lawyers of the century by the Women Lawyers of Western New York? Maryann Saccomando Freedman told reporter Herbeck that on those occasions when the two had a disagreement and Grace Marie was not able to persuade Maryann to agree with her, Grace Marie would look at her directly and say, "You're shorter than me and you always will be." Or, said Maryann, occasionally it might be, "I'm taller than you and you will never be as tall as me." As someone who has seen them through the years, Maryann, as my sister Terry's good friend, and Grace Marie when I was practicing in the same office with John Condon, I can state personally and without reservation they are both giants regardless of their physical stature.

After writing this article, I learned we recently lost another legal trail blazer, Elaine Salvo, who passed away March 12, 2021. Elaine was the daughter of attorney Salvatore C. Salvo and she often accompanied him to his office as a child and became interested in the law. She is the mother of Christa Salvo Rivo, who is also an attorney. She was admired and respected by all who knew her and she, too, will be missed.