

MAKING A DIFFERENCE | Alumni Profile

BY ROBERT M. VILES



Patti Blanchette '80:

First Woman: Bar Leader

Attorney Patti Blanchette recently celebrated her fifth anniversary as a solo practitioner in Portsmouth, NH, after nearly twenty years with the firm of Boynton, Waldron, Doleac, Woodman & Scott, where she has practiced since first admitted to the Bar.

Active in both local and state government, Blanchette served seven terms in the New Hampshire House of Representatives, representing her hometown of Newmarket. She left the legislature to pursue Bar-related elective office and was elected as president of the New Hampshire Bar Association in 1992. She was both the first Franklin Pierce Law Center graduate to fill that position since the school opened its doors 19 years earlier, and the first woman to become president after women were first admitted to the New Hampshire Bar in 1890. She went on to serve as president of the New England Bar Association in 1994 and 1995.

Blanchette has remained active in Bar Association activities and has served on the Professional Conduct Committee, the Board of New Hampshire Legal Assistance, and on several special committees of the Superior Court. She was one of the first members of the New Hampshire Bar Association's Committee on Professionalism, and she currently serves on the IOLTA Grants Committee. She was honored by her peers as an honorary fellow of the New Hampshire Bar Foundation for her distinguished service to the profession and nominated as one of the top ten most professional women by *Hampshire East Magazine* in New Hampshire.

She has served the court system as a neutral evaluator of family law cases and recently became a state certified marital mediator. She was appointed by former Governor Jeanne Shaheen to the Family Law Task Force to study ways to make the divorce process less adversarial.

Most recently, Blanchette was honored in the spring of this year as the recipient of the Fourth Annual Award for Professionalism by the Rockingham County Bar Association, following in the footsteps of Pierce Law alumnus Tom Watson '78 who was the first recipient of the award.

Today, Blanchette has an active family law practice spanning several counties. When not practicing law, she is a devoted walker, avid golfer, roller-blader and ballroom dancer.

The late Robert M. Viles, former dean and president of Franklin Pierce Law Center, interviewed Blanchette for this profile on September 1, 1998 in Portsmouth. It is one of twenty-five interviews Viles conducted for his book entitled Making A Difference which was to feature profiles of alumni he believed would make a positive impact on society.

An article in *New Hampshire Bar News*, July 15, 1992, explains Patti Blanchette's public services as follows:

Her involvement in the Bar Association has included: serving as Rockingham County Governor on the board; as a member of the Finance, Civil Rules of Procedure, Fee Dispute Resolution and Long Range Planning committees; and as a member of substantive law sections on family law, worker's compensation law, and municipal and government law. Blanchette has also served the overall system of justice as a member of the Supreme Court's Professional Conduct Committee and New Hampshire H. Judicial Council. She has been a board member of New Hampshire Legal Assistance and the New Hampshire Bar Foundation, and is a member of the Portsmouth, Rockingham County and American bar associations.

Attorney Blanchette served 15 years in the New Hampshire legislature representing her native town of Newmarket. She was also active on local government boards serving the Newmarket Budget Committee for 16 years, including ten as chair, and the Newmarket Planning Board. She has also been a member of the State Commission on Children and Youth and the board of Seacoast United Way.

Patti Blanchette's law practice, primarily in Rockingham and Strafford Counties in New Hampshire, has a significant focus on family law.

RMV: *How have you made a difference as a lawyer?*

PB: If I have made a difference personally, it is that I bring a fair amount of humanity and good humor to the job. My practice is mostly family law, and the humanity and humor help put things in perspective. Some lawyers, lacking a sense of humor, become so intent on the immediate issues that they lose sight of the larger picture.

RMV: *Is that the only way you've made a difference?*

PB: Well, I was in the generation of new lawyers at the time when it was fashionable for a firm to hire one woman but not two. The women coming along immediately afterward had a difficult time because firms had by then already hired their one woman lawyer. As time went on, however, people became more used to women in the courtroom and in practice. When we became part of the hiring process, we were able to convince our partners to hire good lawyers, not just men. I think I have made a difference in my firm in this way.

RMV: *Do you think women have made a difference in hiring all lawyers or mainly in hiring more women lawyers?*

PB: We've shown that qualifications are more than an Ivy League education and a good game of tennis. Personally, I

go somewhere else but didn't quite make it. At age 25, I decided either to obtain a Master's Degree in Social Work or something else. Being in the legislature at the time, I became interested in law from a law-making perspective.

My job influenced me also. Many of the clients who came to me for counseling had low incomes. A lot of their problems were legal, not psychological. Sometimes the problems were related to their lack of income. I found myself becoming a trouble-shooter.

People coming to me were stressed because of their legal problems. While I was supposed to be dealing with them about reproductive issues, I was the only person they saw. Therefore I had to deal with all their problems. You do what you have to do.

For all those reasons I took the Law School Admission Test.

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think I look at life experiences of candidates in part because I had another career before law school. If an individual has done other things and have gained some maturity, they have a different view and understanding of the world.

RMV: *What else?*

PB: Serving seven terms in the New Hampshire House of Representatives has given me the perspective of the need to gain consensus and to bring people together for a favorable result. This is different from the one-on-one adversarialness of litigation.

My legislative experience has taught me a lot of patience. I understand why a legislative statute may seem a little crazy. It has to have a little bit of everything in it in order to please everybody. When I appear before the New Hampshire Legislature, which I still do once or twice a year, I like to believe that I'm regarded as one of them. I respect them and the common experience which we share. A few even remember me.

RMV: *What was your life before law school?*

PB: I was a social worker in a federally-funded family planning clinic. When I applied to law school, I responded in that place on the application form asking about skills useful at the law school that I ran a vasectomy clinic. I was admitted anyway. I'm New Hampshire, born and bred. I grew up in Newmarket and went to the University of New Hampshire. I planned to

Part of the reason for my choosing to apply to Franklin Pierce Law Center was to be able to stay in the legislature while in law school.

When I was in the legislature I was the subject of a little film called "Law-Maker at Work." It was part of the "Our New Hampshire" series. It was originally designed to teach lessons about government to fourth graders. A camera crew followed me around for two months at home, work, and school in order to humanize legislators. When the film was tested it was found that, because high school students knew so little about the legislature, it was a useful teaching tool from fourth grade through twelfth grade. There are clips of Franklin Pierce Law Center in the film, including one of the late Professor Bruce Friedman at his finest. I stayed in the legislature until I ran for vice-president of the New Hampshire Bar Association.

RMV: *How did you happen to run for this office?*

PB: There was a Bar function in Laconia one evening. Afterward we all went over to the home of my friends who were lawyers, Leslie Nixon and Lee Nyquist. By the end of the night my friends had talked me into running, or I had talked myself into running.

Of course, my interest in the Bar Association started a long time before that. I knew Paul McEachern, a Portsmouth lawyer who was then Bar Association president. When I graduated from law school, Paul was making a concerted effort to

involve women in Bar Association activities. He invited me to join the committee to revise the New Hampshire rules of civil procedure. At the time, I laughed that I didn't want to embarrass myself. I didn't yet know anything about the state's civil procedure rules, much less being in a position to revise them. When I joined, I had no idea it would be a multi-year project and become the saga that it has become.

Serving on the committee was an opportunity for me to associate with a group of distinguished lawyers and judges, people like Bruce Felmly, Martin Gross, Judge William Batchelder, and Bill Chapman. I came to know people with whom I wouldn't otherwise have had contact. Looking back, this was an important opportunity.

Once you are on a committee like that one, you're seen by other Bar leaders, and you're likely to be called on again when another committee is formed. That's how I got started in the Bar Association.

RMV: *What were your accomplishments as Bar Association president? Of what are you proudest?*

PB: At the time there was much turmoil. There was a change in the executive directorship. A lot was done that would never make the history books. I spent much time building consensus and trouble-shooting.

I'm most proud of being a role model for young women. It didn't start out that way; I didn't know there would be so much notoriety in becoming Bar president. I found myself frequently invited to school groups and women's groups. Invited in the capacity of Bar president, I had an excellent opportunity to talk about what the practice of law is really like. It was a great opportunity for young women and girls to see a woman lawyer in action. That is what I enjoyed the most.

People take us lawyers either too seriously or too lightly. When I hear lawyer jokes—they frost me as much as blonde jokes—I say, "Who do you call when you're in trouble?" People don't see lawyers working hard, putting in long hours for their clients. When I wake up at 3 AM, I'm not worrying about the rose bushes in my garden; I'm worrying about my next case. I want people to know how much we care about their cases.

RMV: *In what other ways did you make a difference when you were president of the NHBA?*

PB: I looked at myself as an ordinary lawyer, in the trenches every day. I brought that attitude to my leadership of the Bar Association. My theme was that, although we do different things, we're all in this together. A door was opened for me to lead our Association, and I was determined to leave that door open for other ordinary lawyers to lead it.

RMV: *Do you think graduates of Franklin Pierce Law Center have as a group made a difference in New Hampshire?*

PB: Yes. Although they follow different paths and specialties, they have a professional camaraderie. For example, I refer my criminal cases to an alum who is a criminal lawyer, and he refers his family-law cases to me. Although we are all competitors for clients, there is less competition in ego terms here than in other places. We are able to call each other—and to call the faculty at the school as well—when we have an unusual situation. I was calling Professor Bruce Friedman right up until he left for China.

The graduates have made a difference in another way as well. For a while we were the underdogs. We came from a new school. The people making hiring decisions were not sure of the kind of lawyers the school produced. Where the hiring partner went to law school made a difference.

Now all that has changed. Many Franklin Pierce Law Center graduates are in hiring positions. They are in positions of leadership and are members of the judiciary. It has been a little like the situation of women that I talked about earlier. At first you're hired as tokens. Eventually you're hired on the merits because earlier graduates are doing the hiring. Finally, you're hired because you're the best lawyer for the job.

In thinking about this, I'm feeling older with every minute! It doesn't seem that long since the school began and I began to practice law in New Hampshire.