

Brooklyn Law School Annual Alumni Luncheon
February 8, 2019
Mandarin Oriental, New York City
Honoree Remarks

Hon. Rosalyn Richter '79

Associate Justice, New York State Supreme Court
Appellate Division, First Department

Professor Schneider, thank you so much for the generous introduction. Your scholarship and commitment to public service is inspiring and you have meant so much to generations of law students, lawyers and judges, especially those in the National Association of Women Judges. Liz, I was not a Sparer fellow because it did not exist then, but I know the extra-ordinary work you have done in the program. I also thank you for your efforts and scholarship in the domestic violence arena.

I want to thank the law school and the alumni association for this recognition. I extend my congratulations to my sister honorees, Lee Wellington and Professor Feldman. I am so pleased to share the stage with you today.

There are so many people here who, if time permitted, I would personally thank but I am not going to start naming names for fear I will leave someone out. I truly appreciate the presence of my friends, family, law clerks, colleagues and yes, the women I studied with in my first year at Brooklyn. We were some lesbians and some older women who went back to school and people wondered how we fit together, but we helped each other get through. You honor me by being here. I want to dedicate this award to my spouse, Janet Weinberg, who unexpectedly passed away in September, and who would have been so proud of me.

It is hard to believe that it will be 40 years this June since I graduated from law school. I look back on what life was like in the 1970s, and honestly, no one then would have thought it possible that I would become a judge. And that includes me. There were no out lesbian or gay judges anywhere in the United States, and only a handful of out lawyers. There were states in which it was illegal to have same-sex consensual relations and you could lose custody of your children simply because you were gay. There were very few women judges then, and no woman on the Appellate Division, First Department, where I currently sit. And then there was the issue of my being visibly disabled—the view in the profession then was that being visibly disabled posed obstacles in the courtroom especially if you wanted to do trial work. I remember being interviewed back then and someone asked how I would get to court - a question I knew they were not asking all the applicants. I replied, “by public transportation, just as I got to the interview.” I suspect it’s no surprise to any of you—I did not get that job. I have gotten a lot better at interviews since then.

I am glad to say that in many ways times have changed, and I am not the only example of this progress. Present here, there are other openly gay or lesbian judges, out law professors, women law partners and Brooklyn Law School has a woman interim Dean—and she is not the first female Dean at the school. We must celebrate this progress.

But in other ways, to my disappointment, things have not changed. So much has been written about the lack of diversity in the legal profession, especially in large law firms and in corporations. In the past few weeks, virtually every day there has been a story in the New York Law Journal or some other national publication about this topic.

A number of years ago, I and the other women judges on the First Department noticed a pattern every week at oral argument. The courtroom would be full and would be quite diverse both in terms of race and gender. When the criminal and family cases were called, women and people of color would come up and argue. When the big commercial cases were called, the lawyers looked totally different. We organized several programs about this at the City Bar and held mentoring breakfasts to work with partners at large law firms to identify the obstacles that were creating this pattern. More recently, other bar associations have issued reports and held their own programs on the topic. But it is 2019, and as the calendar is called each week, I don't see much of a difference from what I saw a number of years ago. We have to ask ourselves what we can do differently.

It has to start in law school, if not at the high school and college level. This is one of the reasons I am volunteering in a high school. We all—professors, lawyers and judges—must make a conscious effort to encourage people to consider careers that they might not otherwise have considered. When the email comes asking you to sponsor or mentor a diverse student, including a high school or college student, please consider answering yes!

Senior lawyers and clients have to take a chance on somewhat younger lawyers, especially if the person is from a diverse background, and give them an opportunity to argue a motion or do a deposition. I am not suggesting that work be given to people who do not have the skills to do it, but all too often I see the same faces standing up in court on the high-profile cases. I wonder why the person I see taking notes on the side, who probably wrote the brief, is not being given a chance to stand up and appear before the court.

So many people gave me opportunities and I would not be here today if that had not happened. I want to pay special tribute to Professor Carol Lefcourt, who unfortunately died way too young, who gave me my first job out of law school. David Dinkins, New York's first African American mayor, showed great courage in appointing me and so many other judges from diverse backgrounds. And I owe so much to Governor David Paterson, who selected me, along with Justice Elizabeth Garry, as the first out appellate judges in this state. All of these people went outside their own worlds to make sure I was successful, and I will be forever grateful. I pledge to do the same in the years I have left in the profession and I hope you will take this message to heart.

Thank you again for this extraordinary recognition.

Linda Feldman '83

Professor of Law Emerita
Founder and Past Director of the Academic Success Program
Brooklyn Law School

I am deeply honored to be included with Judge Richter as one of BLS' Alumni of the year and with our rising star, Lee Wellington.

Brooklyn Law School is near and dear to my heart; it has played a very large part in my entire adult life.

I first walked into the building at 250 Joralemon Street 41 years ago. A lifetime ago, a time when Jimmy Carter was President, when disco—heaven help us—was the rage, and when the Patriots were NOT in the super bowl.

My husband, Jack Wright, class of '81, and I were 1Ls together—he was a full-time student while I was a Jr high school social studies teacher during the day and a law student at night. Someone had to pay the tuition!

It wasn't easy—that's the one thing everyone in this room can relate to—the memory of how hard law school was. And we had both our children during law school. So, no, it wasn't easy. But honestly, it was a good time in our lives. We made wonderful friends, and we got a first-rate education. Our professors were scholars, but also great teachers and supportive mentors. Some more quirky than others, but all memorable. We studied, graduated, passed the bar and moved on.

And that's where most law school stories end. But not mine.

I entered BLS with the class of 1982 but finally left with the class of 2018. I have been fortunate enough to have had a 36-ear law school run. How did that happen? I guess you could say I won the "best job" lottery. A few years after I graduated, Dean David Trager called me. He was concerned that students were not reaching their academic potential. He said, "Feldman, you're a teacher, you went to law school, do something".

So, along with Carol Ziegler, we created a Summer Legal Process class which offered early support to incoming students, and then I developed an Academic Success program, one of the first in the nation.

I guided students as they navigated the rocky first year of law school, working on mastering legal analysis, reading cases, writing case briefs, creating outlines, and

writing exam answers. I had the privilege of seeing nervous 1Ls become confident 3Ls who passed the Bar and went on to great professional lives. I have often said that I had the best job, at the best law school, in the best borough in New York City, and I am deeply grateful to Brooklyn Law school for that.

Thank you so much for this award. It means the world to me.

Leslie (Lee) Wellington '13
Executive Director
Urban Manufacturing Alliance
Rising Star Award

Thank you to Professor Schneider for that introduction, and also, for the years you have devoted to cultivating such a vibrant community of public interest lawyers at Brooklyn Law School. The Sparer Fellowship Program has been such a gift to so many of us.

Thank you to this community at Brooklyn Law for this beautiful celebration today, and a warm congratulations to all of the honorees: Justice Richter, Professor Feldman. It is such an honor to share the stage with you both, and particularly touching to be here beside Professor Feldman, who supported me through my time at law school.

Now, a few confessions for you all.

The first, is that I have been very, very emotional about this award ever since I received news of it. My husband can verify this. To be honored by Brooklyn Law is the ultimate honor for me.

- As I look around this room, I see faculty that have changed the way I look at the world and break down problems.
- I see my intern supervisor, Jane Landry Reyes, a gifted housing attorney and natural teacher.
- And I see recent graduates, that are daily inspirations for my public interest work. For instance, there is Hannah Roth and Dana Wolfe- dear friends and fierce advocates.
- Hannah spends her days working to make our city's transportation infrastructure work for all New Yorkers at and Dana tirelessly fights for the rights of criminal defendants.
- I reference just a few of these attorneys in the room to demonstrate that I am in a galaxy of rising stars here at the Law School and I thank you for this acknowledgement.

Now here's my second confession: I loved law school. I truly did. People outside of my Brooklyn Law School are often surprised when I say that, but there is something distinct about this community. As I reflected on what distinguishes our culture at Brooklyn Law School—I think it comes down to a mixture of procedure and people.

First on procedure: This is a law school that celebrates both procedure *and* substance. After all, procedure changes lives. I'll never forget learning about the case *Goldberg v. Kelly*—which fundamentally changed the way we treat public assistance. The timing of a hearing, the steps somebody takes to interact with a government agency—these processes deeply matter. They can be the difference between success and failure. I saw that respect for the procedural elements of our profession come through in the way *all* of the courses at Brooklyn Law were taught—whether I was sitting in criminal procedure or legal writing or women in the law.

And second, people matter. This is a law school that takes a whole person approach to the profession. And I'll share just briefly—something Professor Fullerton said to her class at the end of Civil Procedure. She said:

- I want you to do well on the final exam, but what is more important than any grade is knowing that I am a resource to you. You are so much more than your performance at a single moment in time.
- She took time to make sure we knew that. It was about a relationship- and understanding that people are your best resource.

This sentiment is emblematic of our law school's culture- where we were encouraged to authentically connect to our community, draw from it, and give back.

Now during law school, I had the privilege of doing direct client work, including working with street vendors—food vendors, merchandise vendors—people that made a living selling what they made on the streets of New York City.

- I worked with one entrepreneur to get licensed to sell cake pops at her first market.
- Moving through the steps to be properly permitted might not seem like a glamorous legal assignment- but to me it was, because process matters- the rules associated with vending mattered, the security of knowing you're operating within a legal framework matters- and my client mattered.
- It comes back to procedure *and* people. That woman selling cake pops for the first time went on to run a full-service catering operation—she employs people in her community, and she is a food manufacturer using a shared kitchen space in Brooklyn.
- Being even one small part of this woman's dream was honorable to me.

Today, I am the Executive Director of the Urban Manufacturing Alliance, a national non-profit that works to make sure that all cities have the right ingredients to support everybody from a cake pop maker to a jewelry designer to a medical device manufacturer as they grow in their communities.

- And I see people, again, as my best resource.
- The people that are thinking about zoning and other land use controls, workforce training, and the space that is needed to support manufacturing businesses.
- It is my job to connect them, understand the issues they share in common, and work with them to shape the processes in their city that impact manufacturers.

- It is a dream to do this work and my time at Brooklyn Law has prepared me for this work.

And as I close, I want to acknowledge my family: my parents, my sister, my husband ben, who are all here today (and my very active son Miles and daughter Sadie that are not here today). Thank you for all you continue to give—both to me and the world around you—to make this moment possible.