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THE CHALLENGE

The newsletter of the ISBA's Standing Committee on Minority and Women Participation

Kathryn Zenoff: First Woman Chief Judge of the Seventeenth Circuit

By Susan M. Brazas

A graduate of the Columbia University School of Law, also an honors graduate of Stanford University, walked into a midtown Manhattan law office seeking work. The graduate came from a family of lawyers, had spent a college year abroad in Paris and Geneva, and had graduated in the top 5 percent of the senior class at New Trier High School. The graduate was waved away from the law office with the words, "We aren't prepared to hire a woman."

Today, that graduate is the Chief Judge of the Seventeenth Judicial Circuit, at the Winnebago County Courthouse in Rockford, Illinois. Judge Kathryn Zenoff has made her mark in many ways despite the obstacles that have faced her from the beginning. Starting even in her law school days at Columbia, she attained many "firsts," among which was being named the first woman law student selected to participate in the International Fellows program at Columbia. And today, she is the first woman elected as Chief Judge in the Seventeenth Judicial Circuit. Her job includes the management and administration of this Circuit which is comprised of Winnebago and Boone Counties, with a total of

nine Circuit Judges and 14 Associate Judges. Her colleagues expressed their confidence in her skills by re-electing her for a third term as Chief Judge, commencing in January 2006. She has enjoyed the opportunity to exchange knowledge with her fellow Chief Judges through participation in the Conference of Chief Judges, admitting that the learning curve was "pretty steep."

From Lawyer to Jurist

Judge Zenoff began her judicial career in 1995, when she was first appointed as Associate Judge. She was then appointed Circuit Judge by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1998. She was elected to the position, without opposition, two months later, in November 1998. Just three years later she was named Presiding Judge of the Criminal Felony Division, where she has served for two years.

Judge Zenoff brings to the bench the practical perspective of several years of civil private practice, and of criminal prosecution. One New York City law firm wisely hired her, and she was their first woman attorney. There she practiced in commercial law, and real estate, tax, and trusts and estates for four years. She then returned to Chicago to practice with her father and brother Alan, at Zenoff & Zenoff, a general commercial practice, municipal and divorce division firm, for five years.

For the next 14 years Judge Zenoff served as an Assistant State's Attorney first in Cook County and then in

Winnebago County, where she was the third woman attorney hired, and was eventually named Deputy State's Attorney. In that period she held many key roles, including heading up the Juvenile Division and the misdemeanor trial unit, and serving as lead prosecutor for countless significant felony trials.

An Agent of Change

Throughout her legal career Judge Zenoff has been a facilitator of improvements to the local justice system which have afforded citizens greater access to services and to the courtrooms. It was Judge Zenoff's initiative and tenacious follow-through to implementation which led to the creation of the first supervised children's waiting room in the Circuit. "The Kids' Place" is located in the Winnebago County Courthouse and has provided a safe and pleasant place to play for more than 18,000 children since its opening in 1998. She also participated in the plans to open a second children's waiting room for the Circuit, which will be housed in the new Criminal Justice Center being built in downtown Rockford. She was the facilitator for a successful county-wide funding referendum for the Children's Advocacy Project in 1993. She also initiated the formation of a Mental Health Court within the Circuit in June 2003, and she has been Presiding Judge of that Court since it began in February 2005.

Judge Zenoff's current daunting

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task is leading the Judicial Transition Committee through the move (planned for spring 2007) of the criminal courts from the County Courthouse to the new Criminal Justice Center. She also was appointed in 2002 to the Illinois Supreme Court's Committee on Professional Responsibility. Judge Zenoff has been given numerous awards in recognition of her accomplishments, including the Rockford YWCA Award for Community Service and awards for Outstanding Service by the Rockford College Board of Counselors.

Seizing Opportunity

The most rewarding aspect of her job, though, is being in the courtroom. Judge Zenoff finds that courtroom work presents an intellectual challenge, and

an awesome responsibility to ensure that each party has the opportunity to be heard and have a fair hearing. She strives to provide access to justice in a fair and efficient manner, keeping mindful that the process is perceived as fair and efficient as well. As such, she believes, judges make a broader contribution to American democracy.

Only 10 percent of Judge Zenoff's graduating class at Columbia Law School were women, compared to 49 percent of that School's most recent graduating class. She remarks that although many "glass ceilings" have been broken, much remains to be done in the way of opportunities for women in the legal profession. Judge Zenoff describes her mother, who was not a college graduate, as the most influential person in her life. She

encouraged her to pursue her own interests, and to accomplish what she wanted to set out to do. "She always encouraged me to think that the hurdles were not insurmountable."

These many years later, in reflecting, Judge Zenoff has no regrets about her career. She has faced the obstacles before her and chosen to see them as opportunities. Perhaps it was the closing of that first office door which inspired the young graduate to try, again and again, to open other doors, and then, to lead the way.

Susan M. Brazas is an attorney in Rockford. She is past Co-Editor of this newsletter, a past member of the Committee on Minority and Women Participation, and a past Chair of the Committee on Women and the Law.



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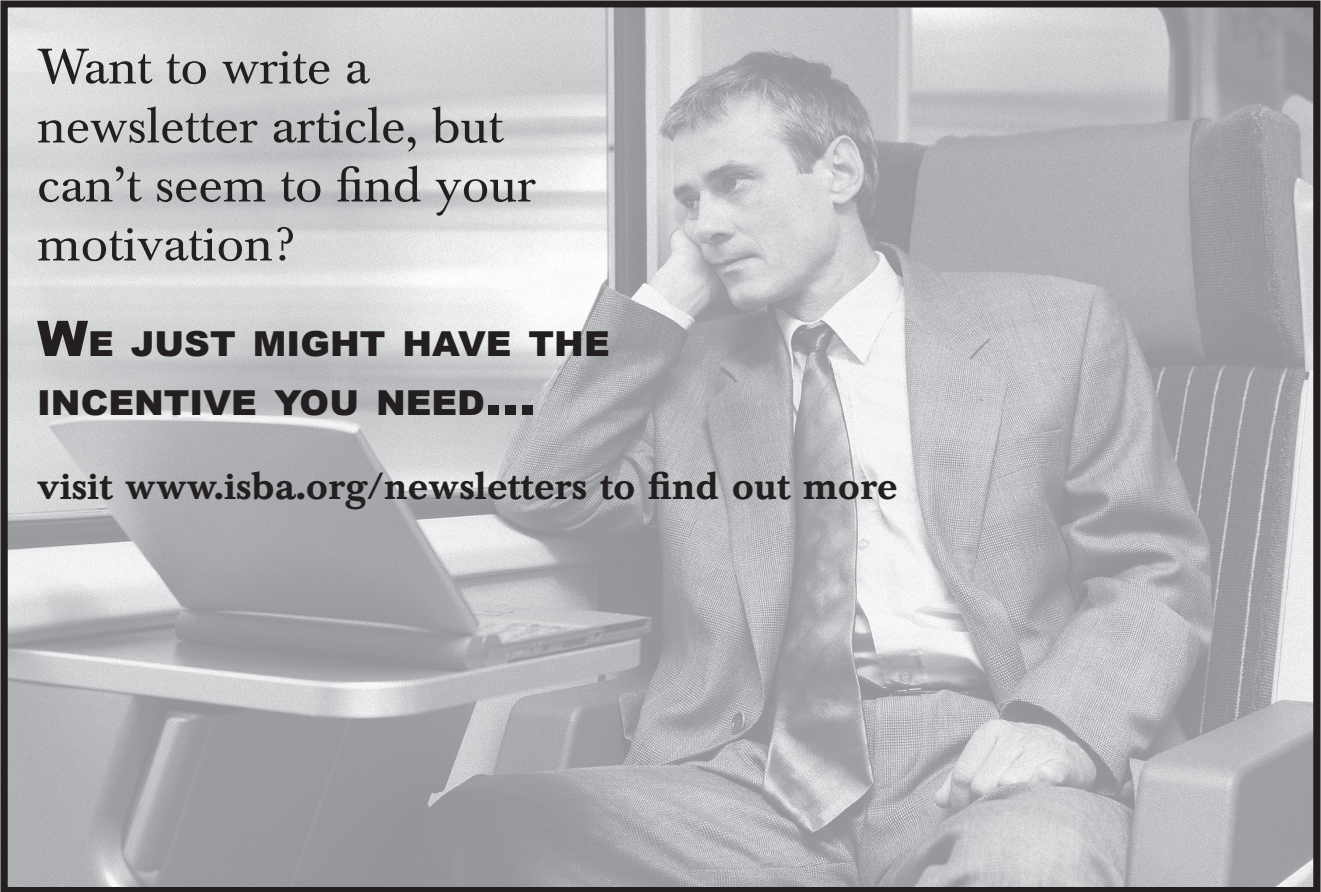
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