

ERIC STOCKLIN



Judge Irma S. Raker received the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award, which is named for the country's first lawyer: a 17th century Maryland woman who demanded 'a voice and a vote' in the legislature.

Raker receives ABA honor

Brent award recognizes women's achievements

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Rather than take her mother's advice and become a schoolteacher to spend more time with her family, Irma S. Raker did something unusual for women in the 1960s: she went to law school.

Nearly 40 years later, she can claim to have become the first woman prosecutor in the history of Montgomery County and the second woman appointed to the Maryland **Court of Appeals**.

Yesterday, Raker, 69, was honored for her pioneering spirit by the **American Bar Association** at its annual meeting in San Francisco. She received the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award, named for the country's first female lawyer who also happened to be from Maryland.

"I'm super-honored and very humbled when I look and I see who has received this award in the past and now," she said. "It's a huge honor to be included in this illustrious group and I'm very excited to bring Margaret Brent home to Maryland."

The only other Marylander to have received the award was Baltimore lawyer Jeanette Rosner Wolman, now deceased.

Raker always wanted to be a lawyer, she said, from her days as a teenager in Brooklyn observing her father research forensic evidence and then go to court for his criminal defense work. She was accepted at New York University School of Law, but put off her legal studies when she became engaged to her nuclear engineer husband, Samuel, just after graduation from Syracuse University in 1959.

When she finally did start law school 10 years later, this time at American University, she was 32 and the mother of three

small children.

Raker's family was supportive, however, and gave her the space to flourish.

After graduating in 1972, she was hired by the Montgomery County state's attorney. The office had never had a woman prosecutor.

"She did such an extraordinary job, which made it possible for other women to come in behind her and serve in those positions in which you wield a great deal of power," **Montgomery County Circuit Court** Administrative Judge Ann S. Harrington said. Harrington joined the state's attorney's office two years after Raker did, and was only the fourth woman lawyer to work there.

Raker went on to become a district court judge, a circuit court judge and then a judge on the Court of Appeals in 1994.

Her famed decision as a Montgomery County trial judge in *Burning Tree Club Inc. v. Bainum* is credited with changing country club practices in and out of state. The opinion held that a country club that refused to accept women as members was not entitled to a special tax exemption.

"It was the strength of her character, her intellect, her hard work and her ability to deal with her fellow lawyers and judges that has resulted in her many successes," longtime friend and Rockville litigator William T. Wood said. "She's probably the most well-known and highly respected lawyer in the state amongst many outstanding lawyers and judges — amongst men and women."

Alison L. Asti, president of the **Maryland State Bar Association**, commented that Raker's place as one of the first women on the Court of Appeals has "made her

Raker honored

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a trailblazer for women, showing that there really are no barriers to accomplishing what you want.”

Although regarded by friends, colleagues and the greater legal community as a pioneer, Raker does not consider herself one.

“When I went to the Court of Appeals, there were no other women, you can’t ignore that,” she said. “On the other hand . . . , at the end of the day a wise old woman judge and a wise old man judge reach a wise decision.”

The American Bar Association has honored five women annually with the Brent Award since 1991. Criteria are that the honorees have influenced other women to pursue legal careers, that they opened doors for women lawyers historically closed to them, and that they advanced opportunities for women in a practice area or segment of the profession.

This year’s other honorees are Roxana C. Bacon, executive director of Western Progress in Phoenix, Ariz.; Judge Marsha S. Berzon of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco; Angela M. Bradstreet, managing partner of Carroll, Burdick & McDonough LLP in San Francisco; and Marva Jones Brooks, a partner at Arnall Golden Gregory LLP in Atlanta.

Past honorees include Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and former Deputy U.S. Attorney General Jamie S. Gorelick.

Bringing home Mistress Brent

Judge Irma S. Raker’s remarks to the ABA

In early 1638, a young woman, named Margaret Brent, of Gloucester, England sailed for the new world on a ship appropriately named Charity. She and her siblings arrived in St. Mary’s City on the shores of what was then the Proprietorship of her cousin, Lord Baltimore — the colony that he would name Maryland. Ms. Brent would become not only the first female lawyer in North America, but, in essence, would become in those early critical years, the foremost defender of the colony — and perhaps the most important personage of that era.

No person of either gender, in that time, played a more important role in preserving the colony of Maryland. She was the first woman in North America to appear as an attorney in court. She was the lawyer for the governor of the colony. She appeared as an attorney in over 134 cases. She was the first woman in Maryland to hold land in her own name. In the process, she amassed one of the largest real estate holdings in the America of her time.

More important than all of that is the role she played in facing the serious military challenges of the time. She helped in raising the forces that re-took St. Mary’s City after it had been seized by the forces of William Claibourne. Later, almost single-handedly, she quelled a mutiny amongst the governor’s followers. She saved Maryland.

She lived in a turbulent period and was at the center of all things that were occurring in that time so long ago. In the process of living her life as she perceived her role — she made history. She was the first feminist in this country, demanding a “voyce and a vote,” a “voyce” in the Governor’s council proceedings, and two votes in the Maryland Assembly, one for herself as a landowner, and the second, as the attorney for Lord Baltimore. This request was more than 250 years before women were given the right to vote in the United States.

Her history, Maryland’s history, and her meaningful role as a woman in a man’s world, is a story we, in Maryland, have been proud to proclaim over the years. Moreover, it is a story to which many lawyers admitted to practice in our State are exposed. She was a person, a woman, that we take great pride in — not only because of the positions and roles she played in history, not only because of her greatness — but because she is ours. We share her with you because her legacy is not just for us, but is for the ages. Her life was the harbinger of what we women are today. She was the first of us, the first of the ‘modern woman’ — 360 years ago.

When I learned that I was to receive this award, I was so very honored and humbled. When I learned that all of my colleagues on Maryland’s highest court, the Court of Appeals, had joined together with the Maryland State Bar Association,

the Maryland Women’s Bar Association, and others, to nominate me for this award, it came as a complete surprise. All of them are very familiar with Margaret Brent’s history, and for them to suggest by their nomination that I was worthy of receiving an award named after her was a great honor — in and of itself. To actually receive the award is the ultimate honor for any woman who has devoted her life to the law — especially a woman intimately familiar with the history of Mistress Margaret Brent.

At least twice a year over the last decade, I have spoken of her to new admitees to the bar of our state — steeping them in the story of her greatness. And now I am here with these most distinguished women on the platform I today share, on the other side of the continent, receiving this award, named in recognition of her status in the history of the law of this country.

I want to thank the Commission for Women and all of you for the honor you bestow, not only on me, but on Margaret’s home state — Maryland. Were she here, I think she would be smiling this afternoon — knowing that women today have “a voyce and vote.” Perhaps she would now have the tranquility she sought when she retired to her plantation — named “Peace.”

With your permission, I shall now take Mistress Margaret Brent — home to Maryland.

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