

The Daily Record (Baltimore, MD.)
October 18, 1995, Wednesday
Copyright 1995 The Daily Record Co.
The Daily Record (Baltimore, MD.)
October 18, 1995, Wednesday

SECTION: Pg. 1

LENGTH: 937 words

HEADLINE: Raker Feted by Women's Bar Second Woman Judge on Md. High Court Honored in Name of the First

BYLINE: By Jane Bowling; Daily Record Legal Affairs Editor

BODY:

Whenever Court of Appeals Judge Irma S. Raker has not blazed her own legal trails, the hatchet marks she followed were placed mainly by her only female predecessor on the high court, Judge Rita C. Davidson.

And last week the Women's Bar Association of Maryland presented Raker with its highest honor -- the Rita C. Davidson Award.

Davidson, who died in 1984, was the first woman to serve as a Court of Appeals judge. Raker became the second when she was sworn in last year.

The two women's lives have followed parallel paths in many ways -- a fact made all the more obvious to Raker when she was handed the scarlet robe she would wear for Court of Appeals duty.

"The Court of Appeals judges' robes were cut from one bolt of cloth so the dye matches," Raker said. A new robe would have been a shade off, so Davidson's robe -- with her initials at the neck -- was altered to fit Judge Raker.

"It's very nice to have this connection to history," Raker said. "But I'm only 5'2", so I don't know what it says for my replacement." The margin for future alterations is growing slim.

The 1,200-member Women's Bar Association each year presents its Rita C. Davidson Award to a person who has contributed to the honor and integrity of the legal profession by advancing the interests of women in the practice of law. Promoting legal education is also a criteria.

"It's really someone who advances the status of women in society through law-related activities," said Association President Susan L. Bayly, who serves as general counsel to the University of Maryland.

And the recipient doesn't have to be a woman, she pointed out. Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert C. Murphy was honored in 1992.

It was Murphy who presented the Davidson Award to Raker last Thursday, crediting her with "turning our normally stiff and staid bunch of men into a bunch of smilers." He joked about his tendency to call Raker "Rita," confusing her with Davidson, on the bench and in the court's deliberations. Murphy proved his point by referring to her as "Rita" in presenting the award. "Rita C. Davidson changed the legal and judicial landscape in our state," Murphy said -- and he pointed to Judge Raker's career as the continuation of that legacy.

"Irma Raker is one rare lawyer -- one very rare judge," he said.

Both Raker and Davidson began their legal careers in the Montgomery County court system, and both joined the high court representing the 3rd Appellate Judicial Circuit -- which includes Allegany, Frederick, Garrett, Washington and Montgomery Counties.

In 1973, a year after completing her J.D. at American University, Raker became the first woman named an assistant state's attorney for Montgomery County.

Piper and Marbury partner Deborah Jennings, a speaker at last week's awards dinner, was in law school at the time and working as an investigator for the white collar crime unit of the State's Attorney's Office.

"People didn't look to see how Irma would do as a prosecutor," she recalled. "They looked at her to see how a woman would do as a prosecutor."

Raker said change came fast and furious after Andrew L. Sonner, who continues to hold the state's attorney's post, took her on as an assistant.

"Within six months, the state's attorney hired another woman, and the first African-American state's attorney," she said. "Then the public defender started hiring women.

"It wasn't long before you came into a courtroom and saw women sheriffs, women prosecutors and women defense attorneys all in the same case -- lots of faces, just as it should be."

Raker entered private practice in 1979, but it was only a couple of years before she was tapped for the county district court bench. By 1982, she had been elevated to the circuit court, where she presided until John F. McAuliffe retired from the Court of Appeals Dec. 31, 1993.

Along the way, she stepped to the forefront of programs aimed at helping women. Her work in the late 1970s was considered instrumental in establishing Montgomery County's Rape Crisis Center, and she has been widely recognized for her contributions to the fight against domestic violence and child abuse and neglect.

"She's always been an advocate for issues of importance to women and families," said Bayly, the Women's Bar president. "Her advocacy goes back to a time before these issues were in the papers."

But the achievements cited by Raker's colleagues revolve just as much around her legal scholarship as her more gender-based crusades.

For 15 years she has headed the state's committee drafting pattern jury instructions for use in criminal cases.

She was also recently appointed to chair the American Bar Association's Criminal Justice Standards Commission, and said the committee stays busy updating instructions and annotations as needed. "I think it has really changed the practice of criminal law by reducing the energy that lawyers and judges need to expend," she said.

When she started law school nine years after she originally planned -- marriage to nuclear engineer Samuel K. Raker sidetracked her for awhile -- Raker brought her children, ages 3, 6 and 8, in tow to American University's campus to play while she was in class.

And it is perhaps closest to home that her example for women lawyers is best illustrated.

Raker's younger daughter, Leslie Janis, is an assistant state's attorney under Sonner now. Her older daughter practices law in Israel. Her son, in the footsteps of his father, went into science.

"I attended law school when I was three years old," Janis said last week. "I just assumed the law was for women."