

Women in the Law: New Orleans

JUDICIAL PROFILES SPECIAL SECTION

At the 2016 FBA Women in the Law Conference in New Orleans, La., four of the Eastern District of Louisiana's six women judges presented a panel entitled, "The Art of Persuasion: Written and Oral Advocacy." In this tight-knit legal community, these women judges—representing 40 percent of the district's federal judges—support each other and mentor women in the legal community, helping to navigate the sometimes murky waters of practicing in what is still seen by some as "a man's profession." The following mini-profiles show how these judges are blazing a trail for women everywhere.

Hon. Helen "Ginger" Berrigan

by Elizabeth Elliott

Elizabeth Elliott graduated from Loyola University New Orleans College of Law in 2014, where she was the symposium editor for the Journal of Public Interest Law and a student practitioner in the Community Justice Section of the Stuart H. Smith Law Clinic. She is currently in her second year as a law clerk to Judge Berrigan.

Just a glance around her chambers inside the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana tells you that Judge Helen "Ginger" Berrigan does things a little differently. There is the welcome mat at the entry to her chambers; hallways bedecked with holiday decorations; plush toys; numerous handcrafted items from friends, former clients, and prisoners; and curio cabinets filled with souvenirs and mementos from trips around the world. *The Wall Street Journal* once featured Judge Berrigan's eclectic office in an article, complete with a picture of her in front of her faux fireplace.¹ All of it is indicative of an individual who strives to inject humanity and accessibility into a system that does not always feel that it has much of either to those on the outside. As it has been said, "there must be no more intelligent liberal on the federal bench in the South than Ginger Berrigan in New Orleans, a delightful woman who was a respected lawyer before becoming a U.S. district judge."²

Berrigan, who prefers to go by her nickname, "Ginger," was born in New Rochelle, N.Y., in the post-war years. Her nickname is actually the result of her pregnant mother seeing the Broadway show "Time Out for Ginger," and laughing so hard that she went into labor with Berrigan. Seems fitting that Berrigan would enter the world on a wave of joy and laughter.

Growing up in Westchester County, N.Y., provided Berrigan with a comfortable life and an exposure to liberal ideals. But, at a young age, Berrigan lost her mother and quickly became lost in a world of self-doubt. It was a teacher who brought her back. Berrigan credits this teacher with reawakening her sensitivity and giving her the skills to become a positive influence for others. Particularly, she remembers how much it meant to get a word of praise from him



and how now, she says, she "tries to turn around and give the same, particularly to those who I sense are plagued with the same self-doubt that I had when I met [him]. When I sentence someone, I always try to find something encouraging to say to them on what is probably the worst day of their life."

Berrigan went on to graduate from the University of Wisconsin in 1969 and then completed her Masters in Communications at American University in 1971. After graduating, Berrigan was ready to put the liberal ideals of her childhood and education into action. Originally, her plan was to travel through the South on her way to visit friends in Texas. But, after a fellow student told her about a political campaign for an African-American that was in need of volunteers, she decided to head to Mississippi and actively take part in the civil rights movement. It wasn't until after

she accepted that Berrigan learned she was working on the gubernatorial campaign of Charles Evers. In 1969, Evers had become the first African-American mayor in Mississippi following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and in 1971 decided to run for governor of Mississippi. Although ultimately unsuccessful, working on Evers' campaign was an influential experience for Berrigan.

Berrigan describes herself at the start of her work on the Evers campaign as a "typical liberal child of the '60s, from liberal New York and having attended the liberal University of Wisconsin. But I was a flabby, unchallenged liberal.... Suddenly, I was meeting liberal white and black Mississippians who were neither flabby nor unchallenged. They were incredibly courageous and unselfish, they loved their state but were determined to change it in fundamental ways. They were shot at, spat at, and socially ostracized but they persevered. Their inspiration is what sent me to law school and convinced me to stay in the South. Someday, some way, I wanted to be like them."

The ideals of the 1960's and the civil rights movement would provide a lifelong philosophy for Berrigan. For example, one of the great "mantras" from the 1960s that still influences her to this day is "if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." Berrigan says that although this is true, "there are lots of problems in our world and only so many hours in the day. However, being part of the solution can be modest. It can be as simple as praising someone who *is* doing something about a particular problem. We all know how energizing praise can be."

Berrigan enrolled at Louisiana State University's Law School in 1973 and began to put her enthusiasm for civil rights and social justice work into action. While in law school she arranged for the "adoption" of a dormitory at the recently desegregated Louisiana Training Institute in Scotlandville³ by LSU law students so as to facilitate weekend visits and athletic activities with the children housed there. Berrigan also organized law students to participate in legal workshops on post-conviction procedures with the inmate counselors at Louisiana State Penitentiary (referred to as "Angola") and other penal institutions in the state.

Following graduation from law school in 1977, Berrigan worked as a staff attorney for the Governor's Commission on Pardon, Parole and Rehabilitation. In 1978, Berrigan became a criminal defense attorney with the Law Firm of Camille F. Gravel Jr. in Alexandria, La. Berrigan cites Gravel as another one of her heroes, and the time spent working with him illuminating. When she came to work for Gravel, he was already an established political powerhouse and Berrigan asked him what it was like to have so much power. She remembers him telling her that "the only value in having power was to use it on behalf of those who didn't." This is a lesson she has

continued to spread whenever she speaks at law school commencements, albeit, using phrases and terminology from "Harry Potter" to convey the "magical powers" an attorney can have in the fight against injustice.

Over the years, her work in criminal defense gave Berrigan the insight to know that intervention at a young age is the key to turning around young offenders and pointing them in the direction of a productive life. Just as her teacher intervened with her, she wanted to become a positive influence on the youth in her community. Berrigan says that although she realizes the impossibility of saving every inner city child, "if we can turn around one life or two, we not only have saved that child from a life of crime but we have saved all his future victims as well. Better to light a candle, than curse the darkness."

In 1994, after her appointment to the bench, Judge Berrigan became involved with Angola's Juvenile Awareness Program, which brought at-risk teenagers to spend a day at Angola, interacting with the inmates and understanding the reality of prison life. She has also traveled to several foreign countries, such as China, Turkey, Georgia, Malawi, and Azerbaijan to participate in international rule of law and human rights programs. A few years ago, Judge Berrigan also started the first reentry court program in the district and has been happy to see it expand.

In her chambers is a framed poster which reads, "Judge each day not by the harvest but by the seeds you plant." This is the mindset Judge Berrigan approaches each day. "Outcomes are largely out of our control, just like the harvest, she says. "If we measure our success, instead, on the seeds planted—or in other words, living each day true to our values—then we can live a very rewarding and satisfying life." ©

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Endnotes

¹Nancy D. Holt, *Workspaces: A Look at Where People Work*, The Wall Street Journal, Oct. 27, 2004 at B4.

²Lanny Keller, *Bloody Tangipahoa*, The Wall Street Journal, March 17, 2005 at A17.

³Renamed Jetson Center for Youth, the facility was closed down in 2014.