



Hon. Deborah K. Chasanow Chief Judge, U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland

Hon. Deborah Chasanow, the first female chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland, is nothing if not humble. She credits the many achievements in her career to “a combination of opportunity and fortuity.” Her husband, Hon. Howard Chasanow, a retired Maryland state appellate judge, shares the real story. “She is the most hard-working person I know,” he says. “She works 10-hour days, every day, and I can hardly remember a weekend where she didn’t do some work. She is devoted to her job.”

Chief Judge Chasanow, who has served as a federal judge for more than 25 years, is taking senior status this October. She recently sat down with the Maryland Chapter of the Federal Bar Association to reflect upon her career.

The chief judge was born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Montgomery County, Md. Because she lived so close to the District, many of the adults in her life worked for the federal government. In her youth, Chief Judge Chasanow determined that she, too, wanted to work as a public servant. Exactly what that meant, however, was not yet clear to her.

Chief Judge Chasanow earned a political science degree from Rutgers University in 1970 Phi Beta Kappa, but came out of college not knowing what she wanted to do with her career. Although she did not have much direct experience with lawyers, a law degree seemed like a versatile option for someone who was interested in government work in Washington, D.C. Because several of her friends at Rutgers were from California, she decided to enroll in law school at Stanford and received her J.D. in 1974. Even after leaving law school, Chief



Judge Chasanow says she was “still searching” for the right career path.

Law school has “changed drastically” since the chief judge graduated, she acknowledges. When she attended law school, campuses did not provide career planning for those who wanted to work outside of private practice at large law firms. Because Chief Judge Chasanow was interested in public service, she had little guidance from the school’s career development office. She is happy to

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see that law schools have embraced the diverse nature of the legal field and now provide support for careers in public law, state government, and nonprofit fields, and also give students opportunities for clinical education.

During her summers in college and law school, Chief Judge Chasanow worked for Montgomery County—first in the personnel department and later for the County Attorney's Office. It was there where she met David Cahoon, who was then a county attorney. He became a circuit court judge while she was in law school, and the two struck a deal: once Chief Judge Chasanow graduated from Stanford, she would return to Montgomery County and clerk for Judge Cahoon, who would agree not to interview anyone else for the position that year. Chief

Judge Chasanow hoped that by the end of the year that she clerked, she would have a firmer grasp on the direction in which she wanted to steer her legal career. A job in federal policy—drafting legislation—was high on her list of options.

Clerking was a wonderful experience for the chief judge. At that time, the law clerks in state court acted as bailiffs and handled juries. She fondly reflected on late nights waiting for a sequestered jury to return a verdict. Chief Judge Chasanow highly recommends the clerkship experience to recent graduates.

After her clerkship, Chief Judge Chasanow briefly took a temporary position at a law firm. Then, in December 1975, she accepted a position in the Criminal Appeals Division at the Maryland Attorney General's Office. She

believed that this job might also be temporary; she still thought a federal policy position was her best option. Little did she know that she would remain at the Attorney General's Office for the next 12 years and finally find the path she was looking for.

"It is hard to summarize how fantastic that job was. The Attorney General's Office is one of the finest law offices in the state," the chief judge reflects. She noted that the Attorney General's Office provided good work for young lawyers, and that she had many opportunities to hone her skills and grow as an attorney. Because the level of the work product at the Attorney General's Office was "top-notch," the position trained Chief Judge Chasanow to be thorough and accurate. After three years in the Criminal Appeals Division, Stephen Sachs

was elected Attorney General and offered Chief Judge Chasanow the position of chief of the division. She served in that capacity from 1979 through 1987.

In the late 1980s, Chief Judge Chasanow's husband, Hon. Howard Chasanow, was considering a transition from the Prince George's County Circuit Court to the Maryland Court of Appeals, the highest court in Maryland. Because his wife worked in the Criminal Appeals Division of the Attorney General's Office, the couple knew that conflicts of interest were bound to arise should he make the leap from trial court to appellate court. A position as a magistrate judge at the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland was open due to Judge Frederic Smalkin's elevation to district court judge, and the chief judge decided to apply. The rest, as they say, is history. Transitioning to the bench "was a natural for her," her husband says. She served as a U.S. magistrate judge from 1987 to 1993, when she received her commission as a U.S. district judge for the District of Maryland. She was subsequently appointed chief judge in 2010.

Chief Judge Chasanow credits her time at the Attorney General's Office for preparing her for the role of trial judge. Although she worked in appeals, she talked daily with prosecutors and learned to understand "how they tick." She also read thousands of trial transcripts and believes that process helped her to learn the trial environment "through osmosis." Chief Judge Chasanow notes that because she was never a trial lawyer she enters the courtroom humbly and respects the challenges that litigators face.

The trial lawyers that have most impressed her are those who know their audience, are comfortable in the courtroom, and are able to think cogently on their feet. She appreciates attorneys who are able to "size a judge up" and figure out what she is most concerned with rather than simply presenting a prepared argument. Because courtroom time is limited, the chief judge stresses that attorneys should be well prepared and strive to use their time wisely. Rather than simply re-presenting the arguments made in a brief, she appreciates attorneys who make new presentations or present new ways to consider an argument.

Chief Judge Chasanow encourages new attorneys to strive for excellence in everything they do and to be proud of their work: "own it," she says. She stresses the importance of being completely accurate and avoiding shortcuts in order to engender trust in your work. The chief judge recommends new attorneys seek out mentors and encourages them to keep their eyes open and be ready for new experiences that will help foster their growth.

Chief Judge Chasanow reflects on the changes she has seen in the legal field over time: In the past, the Maryland bar seemed more "communal," and attorneys treated each other with a greater sense of mutual respect. The chief judge finds that the current legal field is too large and impersonal and worries that satisfaction

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of the practice of law is harder to come by. She encourages practitioners to try to replicate that former sense of legal community within their professional circles, and to always show pride and respect for the practice of the law.

She also remarks on the progress that the legal community has made in providing opportunities for women lawyers. Chief Judge Chasanow's 1974 graduating class at Stanford Law included 150 graduates—just 20 of whom were female. The class before hers had only five women. Despite these low enrollment numbers, some classmates expressed overt resentment that Chief Judge Chasanow and her female classmates were “taking a man's place” at the school. She also shared that during her character interview for admission to the Maryland bar, the interviewer asked whether she planned to practice law or raise a family. “I told him I didn't know that was a choice I had to make,” she reports.

Despite these challenges, the chief judge also acknowledges that being a woman likely opened doors for her. When she was applying for her first legal positions in the mid-1970s, diversity in the workplace was just beginning to be addressed. Chief Judge Chasanow believes that being a woman may have played some role in her getting a job at the Attorney General's Office. However, once she got the job, she worked hard to show that she

was well qualified for the position.

In her spare time, the chief judge is an avid traveler who credits her parents with instilling in her a joy for discovering the world. The Chasanows have traveled extensively across Asia including trips to China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand. These days, she spends much of her vacation time visiting her stepdaughter and family, who live in London. “I take as much time as I can to be there,” the chief judge says. Howard Chasanow reports, “There is no question that she has been a mother to my daughter, and she is a devoted grandmother.” The Chasanows have one grandson, with a second on the way. Once Chief Judge Chasanow takes senior status in October, she is looking forward to the opportunity to spend extended time with her family.

Of all of her professional achievements, Chief Judge Chasanow is most proud of the fact that she has spent her entire career as part of a public institution. Long before she knew she wanted to be a lawyer, Chief Judge Chasanow knew she wanted to devote her life to public work. She has found immense personal satisfaction in the collegiality of working daily with those who share the common goal of public service. “The law is supposed to help people,” the chief judge states, and it has been her honor to have spent the last 40 years helping others through legal service. ☺