

Judicial Profile

SONIA S. SHARIFF

Hon. Nora Barry Fischer U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania

I REMEMBER THE first time I met Hon. Nora Barry Fischer. It was in the summer following my first year in law school, when I was a law clerk at a Pittsburgh law firm and the chair of the firm's Litigation Department asked me to accompany him to a status conference for a case that was being litigated before Judge Fischer. I had never met a federal judge before, and I was excited.

I certainly did not anticipate that Judge Fischer would take the time to acknowledge me as if I were the second chair on this case, but she did. She went even further, and asked me to attend a lunch with her legal interns. Although I later worked for Judge Fischer and became more acquainted with her, my first experience meeting her encapsulates her best qualities. Judge Fischer possesses the innate ability to make those in her presence feel comfortable and acknowledged. With members of the legal profession, Judge Fischer believes that she has an affirmative duty to encourage them to become better lawyers, law school students, clerks, and ultimately, better people. She leads by example through her civility, pragmatism, incredible work ethic, and kindness.

Judge Fischer knew that she wanted to become a lawyer from a very young age. She attended St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., where she discovered that becoming a female lawyer was no easy feat. The college did not have a pre-law society. Hence, Judge Fischer had to attend pre-law informational meetings in the University of Notre Dame's Engineering Building. In fall 1972, Judge Fischer was one of a small group of female students admitted to Notre Dame's Law School. Attending law school at Notre Dame was particularly important to Judge Fischer, because this was her father's unfulfilled wish. While attending law school full time, Judge Fischer worked throughout the school year in the Law School library and on the weekends at restaurants and retail establishments in Chicago. Taking classes through the summer months made it possible for her to complete her law studies in two and a half years.

After graduating from law school, Judge Fischer worked briefly as a legal editor at Callaghan & Company in Chicago before moving back home to Pitts-



burgh and becoming the first female associate at Meyer Darragh Buckler Bebenek & Eck. At Meyer Darragh, Judge Fischer became familiar with all aspects of litigation. She worked on a wide variety of cases and eventually developed her expertise in the areas of medical malpractice and toxic torts. Additionally, she began doing coverage work for insurance companies, which gave her experience in writing coverage opinions and providing advice concerning policy language early on in her legal career.

As a result, after just three years of practice, Judge Fischer was made a junior partner at Meyer Darragh and later the firm's first female senior partner and member of the firm's management committee. In 1992, Judge Fischer joined Pietragallo, Bosick & Gordon as an equity partner and likewise served on its management committee and as a practice group leader throughout her tenure there.

In addition to excelling as a trial attorney, Judge Fischer has always found the time to be an outstanding teacher. Judge Fischer worked closely with young lawyers at her firms. She gave them meaningful assignments, permitted them to contact clients, and helped them understand the business aspects of run-

ning a law firm. Many of the attorneys that have had the privilege of working with Judge Fischer when she was in practice still describe her as their mentor and continue to seek her advice.

Judge Fischer believes that it is her duty to mentor all young attorneys because lawyers are, first and foremost, part of a profession. Her dedication to mentoring stems from her own experiences. The judge attributes her professional success not only to her hard work but also to her strong role models and mentors. Early in her career, Judge Fischer discovered that female role models were scarce in the legal profession. So, she joined the Pittsburgh affiliate of the National Association of Women Business Owners, where she learned business planning skills and came to know a number of women business owners as mentors and friends. Judge Fischer did, however, find some excellent mentors in several of her male colleagues, including George Buckler, Don Bebenek, Carl Eck, and William Pietragallo II. Following their lead, she mentors the law students and young attorneys who work with her as well as those she encounters through the Inns of Court; the Federal Section of the Allegheny County Bar Association; the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Federal Bar Association; the Women's Bar Association; and the Pennsylvania Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession, in all of which she is active.

For her dedication to the profession over the years, Judge Fischer has received numerous accolades. In 2001, the Pennsylvania Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession honored Judge Fischer with the prestigious Anne X. Alpern Award.¹ She also received recognition as a Pittsburgh Athena Award honoree.² Then, in 2006, Judge Fischer received the Professionalism Award from the Civil Litigation Section of the Allegheny County Bar Association.

In 2007, after 15 years at Pietragallo, Bosick and Gordon,³ Judge Fischer was appointed by President George W. Bush to become a U.S. district judge in the Western District of Pennsylvania. She continues to be recognized for her hard work and intelligence, as well as for the skills that made her an outstanding lawyer: preparedness and pragmatism. As one of her volunteer law clerks, I never once encountered a situation in which Judge Fischer was not completely immersed in the details of each case before her. She is fully prepared for all proceedings and believes that every case should receive the same degree of consideration and preparedness regardless of its complexity or the status of the parties. Judge Fischer gives all litigants a full and fair opportunity to have their case heard and strives to promptly rule on motions because she believes that justice delayed is justice denied.

Similarly, Judge Fischer demands that attorneys who appear before her be thoroughly prepared. In her estimation, an attorney who is even slightly unprepared can seriously undermine his or her client's position. She encourages counsel and parties to work together to resolve their disputes through conferral

and mediation as well as other alternative dispute resolution techniques. Judge Fischer also works with counsel to narrow the issues and focus on the crucial disputes in each case so that valuable time and resources are not spent on unnecessary litigation over discovery issues. Thus, she not only expects a high caliber of professionalism from members of the legal community, she also embodies these principles.

Judge Fischer's strong interest in mentoring young attorneys has continued after she joined the bench. To this end, Judge Fischer organizes the court's summer internship program, which consists of presentations by judges, attorneys, and court staff on important legal issues and other court matters. The internship program is designed to be very collegial and allows the interns to feel as though they are part of a team even if they are working in different parts of the courthouse. The feedback from the participants in this program has been fantastic—the students appreciate not only the substance of the programs but also routinely comment on the fact that Judge Fischer takes the time to meet all of them and give them meaningful career advice. Most recently, the judge has overseen the development of a two-day law clerk orientation program for the court. The program is designed to give new clerks an overview of their roles and responsibilities and to provide them with resources and guidance.

Judge Fischer is also actively involved in a number of judicial committees in the courthouse. For example, she is the co-chair of the Community Outreach Committee, which provides teachers with civics materials so that students can understand the role of federal courts in our country. The committee also sets up tours of the courthouse for groups, including school children. Judge Fischer often acts as one of the tour guides herself and provides a behind-the-scenes look at her courtroom and chambers. These visitors are always very appreciative that a federal judge took the time to meet and speak with them. Thanks to the efforts of Judge Fischer and her colleagues, art exhibits are displayed throughout the hallways of the Western District courthouse and jurors now receive thank you notes from the court for their service. In addition, Judge Fischer and her colleagues are planning an Open Court Program for Spring 2012, which will consist of speaker panels discussing careers in the court and related agencies.

More generally, Judge Fischer has a deep-rooted connection to the Pittsburgh community. When she goes for a walk in the city or in her neighborhood, every few feet someone stops and greets her. Perhaps her remarkable ability to acknowledge and engage people in a meaningful way comes from her experience growing up in a bustling home. As the eldest of eight children, Judge Fischer was involved in raising her younger siblings and often attributes her nurturing qualities to this experience.

In addition to her many accomplishments as a lawyer and now as a jurist, Judge Fischer is also a devoted

wife, mother, and grandmother. She has been happily married for more than 35 years and is the proud mother of three children—Erin, Adam, and Lauren—and recently became an ecstatic grandmother. Two of her children, Erin and Adam, have followed in her footsteps and are lawyers engaged in commercial litigation practice.

Finally, on a personal note, I wanted to write this profile to say thank you to Judge Fischer because she took a chance on me when no one else was willing to do so. After graduation, like many young attorneys facing an incredibly difficult economy, my job prospects were bleak. Judge Fischer was generous enough to let me volunteer with her while I continued my job search. My assignments were always meaningful and I received timely feedback. I enjoyed volunteering and learned a lot—both from her and from the talented clerks and interns that comprise her team. Judge Fischer also took on the role of being my career advisor and put me in touch with lawyers at her former firm, where I eventually became an associate. Judge Fischer often jokes that she is like the proverbial Mother Goose. I, like numerous attorneys, was lucky enough to be taken into her fold. **TFL**

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Endnotes

¹The annual Anne X. Alpern Award is presented to a female lawyer or judge who demonstrates excellence in the legal profession and who makes a significant professional impact on women in the law through mentoring, community-related activities, and achievements that demonstrate leadership.

²The Athena Award program recognizes individuals and initiatives in women's leadership and women owned businesses. For more information about the Athena Award visit www.athenainternational.org.

³In 2008 the law firm became Pietragallo, Gordon, Alfano, Bosick & Raspanti LLP.