

# Hon. Sylvia H. Rambo

Senior Judge, U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania

by Bridget E. Montgomery



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Through the windows of a school bus one afternoon in 1947, a sixth-grade girl observed the stately old building that housed the Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle, Pa. With a flash of intense conviction, the child decided then and there that, whatever it took, she *would* become a lawyer. Today, that little girl is Judge Sylvia H. Rambo of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania.

The road to law school would not be an easy one for Rambo. Her mother, a German immigrant, was a housekeeper by day and a factory worker by night and raised Rambo and her two brothers on her own for a time, with the help of Rambo's maternal grandparents. Rambo understood from the start that her ability to achieve her goal would require extraordinary effort. But grit was a defining feature of her character, even back in those grade-school days. Rambo single-mindedly devoted herself to her school studies, and it paid off as she excelled in school and, ultimately, graduated first in her class from Carlisle High School.

As a standout high school student, Rambo applied for and obtained a full tuition scholarship to Dickinson College. Again, she excelled, graduating *cum laude* in 1958. With acceptance to George Washington University Law School (GW Law) in tow, Rambo packed up and moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked during the day to support herself while attending GW Law's night school. She delved into her legal studies with all of the intense discipline and determination she had cultivated in herself up to that point. But tragedy, and a seeming end to Rambo's law school dreams, soon intervened. In her first semester at GW Law, Rambo received a telephone call summoning her home: Her mother was dying, and she was needed to assist with her care as well as that of her half-sister Ruth, who was just 14 years old at the time. Uncertain she would ever return, Rambo left law school and Washington behind.

Back in Carlisle, Rambo took a job at Dickinson College. But then an unexpected stroke of good fortune intervened. A couple who had lived next door to Rambo's family when her stepfather, a noncom-



missioned officer, was stationed at the Carlisle Army Barracks, invited Rambo and Ruth to live in their home and offered to help care for Ruth. And just that quickly, Rambo was again free to pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer. With her characteristic decisiveness and quiet determination, Rambo left work at Dickinson College over her lunch hour one spring day in 1959, walked down to Dickinson Law School, and asked for an application. Upon her acceptance, Rambo would be the only woman in her entering law school class. Starting over as a first-year law student, Rambo worked hard and she excelled. She remembers her legal education with great fondness, saying: "I loved it. It was interesting, the classes were small, my classmates welcomed me, and my status as the only woman in the class did not hold me back. I was not discriminated against."

It was a demanding time, especially since Rambo continued to work part time at various jobs while attending law school. Rambo persevered, and in 1962, graduated from the Dickinson School of Law. With Pennsylvania then still admitting lawyers to practice under the preceptor system, Rambo had to apprentice under a practicing attorney for six months. Any

concern that it would be difficult for a woman to find a preceptor evaporated when Carlisle attorney James Humer agreed to serve in that capacity. Rambo had worked under his mentorship during the summer between her second and third years of law school, and she completed her apprenticeship in the three months after graduation while also studying for the bar exam. With that requirement fulfilled, and the Pennsylvania bar exam under her belt, Rambo departed for Wilmington, Del., where she worked in the trust department at the Bank of Delaware.

Carlisle would soon call Rambo home again. Following the loss of two of his partners, Humer was in dire need of assistance in his law practice. Knowing Rambo's talent and work ethic, he invited her to join his firm and, in 1963, Rambo headed back to Carlisle to take the position. From then until 1976, Rambo remained in private practice, maintaining a general civil practice that covered real estate, trusts and estates, domestic relations, and criminal law. In 1973, she was appointed an assistant public defender for Cumberland County, which in those days was a part-time position. This allowed her to maintain her private civil practice, while steadily building a reputation as a capable, respected practitioner. In 1976, Rambo became the first woman to be appointed chief public defender in the county. Soon after came an opportunity that would propel her into the judicial phase of her legal career.

In 1976, Rambo was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Cumberland County Court of Common Pleas (the trial court level of the Pennsylvania state court system). In another "first," she was the first woman to serve on that court. In 1978, with the expiration of the appointed term about to expire, Rambo stood for election for a full 10-year term on the court. Rambo, however, was a Democrat in largely Republican Cumberland County, and she faced fierce opposition. She lost that election and was, she said, "devastated." But Rambo's deep disappointment was soon relieved when good fortune again intervened.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter, following through on a commitment to build diversity on the federal bench, was looking for qualified women to fill federal judicial vacancies, including a newly created seat in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania. Rambo, still smarting from her defeat in the county judicial election, wasn't holding her breath. Recommendations streamed in for her, however, and an appointment came through. On Aug. 8, 1979, Rambo was sworn in for yet another "first"—the first woman to occupy a seat on the federal bench in the Middle District of Pennsylvania.

Rambo will be the first to say that she faced a daunting learning curve, coming as she did from a practice and short county judge tenure that had not exposed her to the massive litigation cases or the wide range of subject areas she immediately encountered as a federal judge. Rambo quickly received assignment of the civil cases filed after the March 1979 partial nuclear meltdown at

the Three Mile Island (TMI) Nuclear Generating Station. Many more TMI cases would be filed over time, and for 20 years, she presided over an extraordinarily complex class action, personal injury cases, and municipal suits, all seeking to recover damages allegedly arising from the TMI meltdown.

Rambo regards the TMI cases as some of the most challenging and significant of her judicial career. Managing the cases would have been daunting for a seasoned judge, let alone one just starting on the federal bench. Rambo's discipline and diligence once again carried her through an enormous challenge. Thomas B. Schmidt III, of Pepper Hamilton, worked on the TMI cases (and other Rambo cases over the years). Schmidt observed: "Judge Rambo began as an outsider, a woman with little experience as a trial judge. She quickly demonstrated absolute poise and judicial determination in some of the most demanding cases. I recall her direction of the Three Mile Island cases, which presented amazingly complex procedural and scientific challenges. She mastered them all. That was a large example of her work as a judge over decades—she set the highest standards for herself, and I believe she's met them."

Asked to give examples of other notable cases over which she has presided, Rambo points to the numerous actions filed in the Middle District of Pennsylvania in the aftermath of the 1989 Camp Hill Prison riots. Those notorious riots lasted for three days, causing numerous injuries and the destruction of half of the prison buildings. For many years after, Rambo presided over legions of constitutional challenges and other civil cases arising from the riots.

Rambo also recalls her 1992 decision in *Cordero by Bates v. Pennsylvania Department of Education*, which led to landmark improvements to the system under which Pennsylvania provides statutorily mandated special education services to public school children. Another case she regards as significant is *American Farm Bureau v. United States of America*, a closely watched case in which the plaintiffs challenged the authority of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to issue a total maximum daily load (i.e., a scientifically calculated pollution limit) under the federal Clean Water Act, in furtherance of the cooperative federal and state efforts to restore local rivers, streams, and the Chesapeake Bay. In 2013, Rambo held in favor of the EPA's authority. Her thoughtful decision has since withstood a hard-fought appeal to the Third Circuit and a writ of certiorari to the Supreme Court, which was denied last year.

And in the criminal law arena, Rambo mentions the 1981 *Pocono Downs* case, a notorious and massive wire fraud case against 25 criminal defendants. The case eventually led to a six-week jury trial against 12 of the defendants.

Rambo's contributions to the court go beyond the courtroom and her caseload. She made her administrative mark on the court starting in 1992, when she logged

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yet another “first” as the first female chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania. She remembers that period as a rewarding but extremely challenging one. Among her accomplishments over her seven-year tenure as chief judge, she is particularly pleased to have participated in the finalization of the district court's Civil Justice Reform Act plan.

Off the bench, Rambo's volunteer activities reflect her lifelong interest in all things educational. She has served as a director of the Pennsylvania Bar Institute, the continuing legal education arm of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, and on the magistrate judges committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States. She has not forgotten the law school that helped her realize her dream of becoming a lawyer. In what is a reflection of perhaps her greatest loyalty, she has contributed all manner of support to the Dickinson School of Law, including serving as an adjunct professor, on the board of governors, the board of counselors, and presently on the board of overseers. She has received five honorary degrees, including one from Dickinson College and one from Dickinson School of Law.

As much as Rambo is known for her dogged work ethic, she is not all work and no play, despite what many assume from her serious demeanor on the bench. She greatly enjoys friends and family, and holds a deep appreciation of the outdoors. Over the years, she has been an avid equestrienne, gardener, hiker, and world traveler. Time—and a few injuries—have dictated that she curb the most rigorous of her activities, but her love of travel, friends, family, and the outdoors endures.

Rambo took senior status in 2001. She maintained, however, a caseload substantially larger than that required of senior judges. Her ingrained work ethic would not allow her to ignore the backlog of cases

caused by long-standing judicial vacancies in the Middle District of Pennsylvania. Nowadays, with the vacancies filled, and having celebrated her 81st birthday, Rambo has yet to slow down. She continues to preside over a sizeable caseload with her trademark dedication and diligence. Chief Judge Christopher C. Conner says of Rambo's contributions: “Sylvia Rambo is an extremely bright, hardworking, and dedicated jurist. She cares deeply about the federal judiciary as an institution, and she personifies everything that is right about the institution.”

When asked to what and whom she attributes her success, Rambo responds modestly. She credits her work ethic to her mother, and she recalls the guidance of her late husband, George Douglas, a prominent Central Pennsylvania attorney. Early on, she says, Douglas advised her to follow his simple rule: “Be prepared, be prepared, be prepared.” She also mentions the guidance of a somewhat more famous adviser, Socrates, whose words embody Rambo's approach to her judicial duties: “Four things belong to a judge: to hear courteously, to answer wisely, to consider soberly, and to decide impartially.” Many who have practiced in Rambo's courtroom, or shared the bench with her, or passed through her chambers as law clerks, attest that she took this guidance to heart. She is known to be unfailingly attentive, courteous to counsel, fair to parties, impeccably prepared, and deeply thoughtful in making decisions.

That young girl on the school bus reached her goal and surpassed it, becoming a member of the federal judiciary widely admired for her integrity, diligence, and judicial temperament. Reflecting on her long judicial career, Judge Sylvia H. Rambo said, in her understated style, “It has been full of challenges and rewards that I never anticipated when I decided, as an 11-year-old girl, that I *would* become a lawyer.” ☉

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**Leinenweber Profile** *continued from page 45*

bench, for your inspiring work ethic and passion for the law and for giving me the best job I'll ever have. ☉

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Justin Leinenweber, *Someone You Should Know: Hon. Harry Leinenweber*, 15 PUBLIC SERVANT 1 (April 2014).