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Op Ed Piece
Judge Linda M. Vanzi
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Women's History Month

In Recognition of New Mexico's Women Lawyer Pioneers

For nearly thirty years, March has been designated National Women's History Month to recognize and celebrate the contributions of women throughout history or, as proclaimed in this year's theme, to "write women back into history." We in New Mexico are heirs to generations of women who pushed through barriers with determination and grace, improving the lives of all New Mexicans in the process.

The first women lawyers of New Mexico were trailblazers who forever changed the legal landscape, leading the way for today's law students, lawyers, judges, professors and deans. It took 82 years for the first 100 women to be admitted to the state bar. The 100th woman was admitted only in 1974.

The first woman lawyer was Henrietta Pettijohn, admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court in the Territory of New Mexico on April 15, 1892. On her admission to the bar certificate, the words "well qualified for admission" are crossed out. The sentiment of the times dictated that no woman could possibly be qualified. Attorney Pettijohn was followed by Nellie Brewer Pierce in 1908 who started the first husband-wife law firm in New Mexico; Katherine Burns Mabry in 1917 who practiced in her husband's law office; and Gladys Brice Watts in 1919. All four were admitted to the bar before they were given the right to vote.

The women lawyers of New Mexico stand on the shoulders of Mary Coon Walters, a home economics major, WWII Air Force Pilot and chain smoker who was admitted to the bar in 1962. She became the first woman District Court Judge, the first woman Chief Judge on the Court of Appeals and in 1984 - just 26 years ago - the first woman Justice on the New Mexico Supreme Court.

We stand on the shoulders of Anne Bingaman who was admitted to the bar in 1969 and became the first woman professor at the University of New Mexico School of Law. She went on to head

the Antitrust Division of the Department of Justice and subsequently has garnered too many “firsts” to recount.

We stand on the shoulders of Justice Petra Jimenez Maes and Former Attorney General Patricia Madrid. Admitted to the bar in 1973, they were the first two Hispanic women to graduate from the University of New Mexico School of Law. Justice Maes was the first, and remains the only, Hispanic woman on the Supreme Court and the first Hispanic woman to be Chief Justice. Patricia Madrid was the first Hispanic woman to be elected the state’s Attorney General.

We stand on the shoulders of Justice Pamela Minzner who was admitted to the bar in 1972 and became a monumental figure in our community. She was a law professor, a judge on the New Mexico Court of Appeals, and the first female Chief Justice on the New Mexico Supreme Court. Ask those who knew her and they proudly discuss her intellectual rigor and profound grasp of the law, but they also warmly and affectionately remember her civility, her generosity and her unique brand of simple kindness.

There are so many remarkable women in the first 100 women to be admitted to the state bar. While it took 82 years for the first 100, today 100 women are admitted to practice every 2 years. In 1967, less than 4% of women occupied seats in law schools. Today women comprise over 50% of each class.

Not only did these legal pioneers clear the way for women to practice law in New Mexico, but their contributions as lawyers enriched and benefited the lives of all they served, men and women alike. Of equal importance, the courage and tenacity these women displayed in pursuing their chosen profession should serve as a source of inspiration for the boys and girls, men and women of every generation to create a community where all have the opportunity to pursue their dreams, live from their core, and fulfill their potential.

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