



Remembering Doreen Davis: The Lessons of a Remarkable Journey

By Daniel A. Cirucci

Doreen Davis (far right), a nationally known labor and employment attorney who served as Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association in 2000, becoming the first working mother to hold the position, died on April 7. Here she is pictured with her daughter, Samantha Simmons, and mother, Naomi Davis, at the 1999 Bar Annual Meeting & Luncheon.

Doreen Davis approached every challenge she faced with a determination to be consequential; to make a meaningful difference.

It was just her way. She wasn't about ceremony or titles or imagery. She was simply out to get things done.

This was never clearer than when she sat in my office prior to a critical Board of Governors meeting in 2000 and vowed to win a contentious vote despite formidable odds. And that's exactly what happened. Doreen defied the hallowed tradition of the nation's oldest bar association and convinced the Board to approve mail-in voting for bar elections. Prior to this, voting was in-person or by absentee ballot with due cause.

Considering that 20 years later, the whole country is just beginning to embrace mail-in voting, to call Doreen a "trailblazer" would be an understatement. She had remarkable foresight, stamina, and

the sort of steadfast determination that left others in her wake. But none of these are things that Doreen would necessarily call attention to, as she was not one to shout or cause a scene or storm the barricades.

Instead, during her chancellorship she championed lowered voices and old-fashioned professionalism, coaxing the state Supreme Court to adopt a formal Code of Civility applying to all judges and lawyers in the Commonwealth. She wanted everyone in the profession to treat each other and all participants in the judicial system with courtesy and respect.

Former Chancellor Sayde Ladov, Doreen's friend for 40 years, remembers how Doreen handled a highly charged moment. "Doreen and I were on opposite sides of permitting voting by mail at Bar elections," Ladov explains. "To maintain our relationship, we agreed not to discuss the issue. On the day that the Board of



Governors voted to allow voting by mail, she leaned over to me and said: ‘Thank God that’s over, and we can talk again.’”

Doreen grew up in northeast Pennsylvania’s coal mining region and, according to her husband, Robert Simmons, she “came from nothing” to the top of her profession by tapping a “level of reserve” that allowed her to “figure out how to get where she wanted to go and keep moving forward.”

By any standard, it was a remarkable journey. But Doreen neither fled from nor celebrated her hardscrabble background. And though she could have conveniently forgotten people on her trip to the top, that simply was not Doreen’s way.

“It is still rather amazing to me that my first Bar Association friend would turn out to be one of my dearest and closest friends for life,” remembers former Chancellor Alan Feldman. “Doreen was exceptional: a trusted confidante, an astute adviser, a delightful and interesting companion, and a devoted and loyal friend. I treasure the time I spent with her and Robert over almost 40 years, and I count myself as lucky indeed to have been part of her world.”

Even after she joined the New York office of Jones Day later in her career, Doreen always considered herself a Philadelphia lawyer. “When others ask, ‘Why join the Philadelphia Bar Association?’, I point to people like Doreen Davis as someone I would never have known but for my affiliation with the Bar Association,” says former Chancellor Abe Reich. “I feel blessed to have counted Doreen as a close friend. Even in her most challenging moments she was a beacon of hope and joy. She put a smile on my face whenever I was in her presence.”

Nobody enjoyed a good joke better than Doreen, even when the joke was on her.



A celebratory dinner welcoming her as Chancellor featured Doreen’s colleagues roasting her in a no-holds-barred manner that would hardly pass muster in today’s politically correct climate. Still, no one laughed harder and longer than Doreen, whose appetite for the strategic riposte never wavered.

Doubtless, Doreen’s authenticity and refusal to take herself too seriously played well with her colleagues at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius where she practiced employment law, representing an elite list of clients. “Doreen was so full of life, people would naturally gravitate to her,” remembers Joe Ragaglia, who was mentored by Doreen and counted her as a friend for 26 years. Ragaglia says Doreen “mentored so many Penn State grads” and was “a pioneer and advocate for a legal profession that allowed for both working parents’ family and client responsibilities.”

In fact, as the first working mother to serve as Chancellor, Doreen opened the door to what we’ve come to know as work/life balance. But, characteristically, she did it not with confrontations and demands but with practical suggestions and workable solutions to everyday problems. “She was a straight shooter,” Ladov says.

Doreen approached her medical problems the same way—with reasoned, forthright determination. One of her dearest friends, former Chancellor Frank Devine, says she valiantly waged a 20-year battle with cancer and refused to be vanquished right up till the end—something that continues to inspire him.

Devine remembers a spirited friend with a zest for living who “always made time for her family and friends. Doreen really knew how to enjoy special occasions,” Devine explains. “She could not wait to plan the



next dinner party, celebration, or group excursion. She loved to travel with Robert, their daughter Samantha and friends, and made great memories on safari in Kenya, driving the countryside in Tuscany, or on weekends in Longport. Her journey from Harveys Lake (population 1,268) to the Chancellor’s office,” Devine adds, “taught her to respect everyone—and she lived that lesson.”

For my part, I fondly count my year helping Doreen craft her message among the happiest and most productive of my nearly 30 years at the Philadelphia Bar Association. As the year was drawing to a close, Doreen invited my wife and I to her annual New Year’s Eve party at her home. I was flattered to be included, but I explained that we customarily rang in the new year with a couple of treasured, lifelong friends. “Well, bring them along,” Doreen said, “you’ll have a great time.”

I did, and we did.

That was Doreen Davis!

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