Alumni

A Columbian Ahead of Her Time: Constance Baker Motley

By
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Spring 2004

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard, a complete waste of time,” her supervisor told her in 1943, when Constance Baker Motley ’46LAW announced her plans to turn down a promotion at a lucrative wartime job to attend Columbia Law School. “Women don’t get anywhere in the law,” her boss warned. Well, thanks to trailblazers like Motley, they do now.

The first African-American woman to serve in the New York State Senate (in 1964), the first woman elected as Manhattan Borough President (in 1965), the first candidate for that office to win the endorsements of the Republican, Democratic, and Liberal Parties, Motley was also the first black woman appointed to the federal judiciary, when President Lyndon Johnson chose her to serve on the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York in 1966. Here on the largest federal trial bench in the country, she became the first woman to serve as chief judge, in 1982, and in 1986 she assumed senior status. Thinking back on her career, Motley is amazed at the increase in the number of women in positions of power today. A celebrated civil rights attorney, she is also proud of her hard-fought battles to end racial discrimination.

Born in New Haven, Connecticut, the ninth of 12 children of immigrants from the Caribbean island of Nevis, Motley was determined to attend college despite her hardworking parents’ inability to pay for it. Her big break came when, as president of a council she had co-founded to combat racism and youth unemployment, she spoke at a meeting of neighborhood young people. There, she so impressed builder and philanthropist Clarence W. Blakeslee that he offered to finance her college education and then pay her law school tuition as well. As she relates in her autobiography,

Equal Justice Under Law (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), he told her, “I guess if I can send [my grandson] to Harvard, I can send you to Columbia.”

While she was attending Columbia, a graduating law student suggested that she take over the job he was leaving—as the law clerk for Thurgood Marshall at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDEF). “I was on the ground floor of the Civil Rights Movement without even knowing it,” says Motley. After working with the future Supreme Court Justice through her graduation from law school, she took a full-time position with his legal staff. Motley played pivotal roles in such landmark cases as *Brown v. Board of Education*, James Meredith’s victorious admission to the all-white University of Mississippi, and others involving the rights of student demonstrators.

Columbia Law School Professor Jack Greenberg ’45CC ’48LAW, former director-counsel of the NAACP LDEF, calls Motley indomitable. “When she’d go after some of those Southern defendants,” he says, “it was like Grant at Vicksburg—she would dig in, appealing in case after case until she defeated them.”

So it’s no surprise that Motley won nine out of the ten cases she argued before the Supreme Court. “The tenth case I won 20 years later,” she notes with a smile, “when the Court adopted my view that it was a violation of equal protection for prosecutors in criminal cases to use their peremptory challenges to get rid of all the blacks on a jury panel.”

While Motley’s influence has certainly been felt on a national level, her work has affected local life as well. Her varied cases have included a ruling that female reporters could enter locker rooms at Yankee Stadium during the World Series, the challenge of an adult entertainment establishment to Times Square urban renewal (“I said they couldn’t get rid of Show World, so it’s still there”), and the right of gay protestors to march in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral (“I said they could because the City owns the sidewalk, not the church”).

In 2001, when President Bill Clinton awarded Constance Baker Motley the Presidential Citizens Medal, the White House said, “As a dedicated public servant and distinguished judge, she has broken down political, social, and professional barriers, and her pursuit of equal justice under law has widened the circle of opportunity in America.” Hardly a waste of time.

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