Female judges share journeys to the bench at girls school

Ranks of women continue to rise

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SHAKER HEIGHTS — Benita Pearson knew at age 8 she wanted to be a judge.

She held onto that dream as she grew up one of six children raised by a single mother in Cleveland. She earned a scholarship to Hathaway Brown School, taking a bus to Terminal Tower each morning and then a rapid train to the all-girl college-preparatory school in Shaker Heights.

Her perseverance paid off in December. She was appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio and now hears cases from a courtroom in Youngstown.

In Ohio, women hold top spots across the legal landscape, from Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor of the Ohio Supreme Court to Chief Judge Alice Batchelder of the Cincinnati-based 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, to Chief Judge Marilyn Shea-Stonum of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Northern District of Ohio.

Women also play starring roles in the Cuyahoga County corruption probe. Former U.S. District Judge Kate O'Malley handled the bulk of the corruption docket until she was named to a federal appeals court in Washington. Judge Sara Lioi in Akron was then assigned most of the cases.

Even the primary federal prosecutors in the probe, Ann Rowland, Antoinette Back and Nancy Kelley, are women, as is one-half of the defense team representing high-profile defendant Jimmy Dimora.

Such judicial role models are important because they give young female lawyers and law students someone to emulate, said Anne Murphy Brown, director of the legal studies program at Ursuline College.

While the number of female judges is moving in a positive direction, "I don't know if it will ever even out," said Brown, who is writing a book, "Legally Mom," about balancing motherhood with a legal career. But over time the percentage of women judges should increase.

Batchelder, Shea-Stonum and U.S. District Judge Patricia Gaughan, who sits on the bench in Cleveland, joined Pearson on stage at Hathaway Brown. So did Geri Smith, clerk of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District, who moderated the event.

While Pearson willed her way to the bench from an early age, Gaughan took a while to figure out what she wanted to do. As a student at the all-girl Magnificat High School on Cleveland's West Side, a legal career never crossed her mind, she said.

But after two years at St. Mary's College in Indiana, somebody suggested being an attorney. She went on to Notre Dame Law School.

"I had to be that lawyer in the courtroom that you see on television," Gaughan said.

She became a prosecutor and eventually a judge.

Her message to the students: Don't worry if you don't know what you want to be.

"You just never know what's around the corner," she said.

Batchelder was no more certain about her career. She was going to be a doctor, she said, until she encountered freshman chemistry. By the time she entered the University of Akron law school in the late 1960s, she was the only woman in her class.

Most of the men ignored her, she said, except those who wanted to tell her how to study.

That all changed after the first term, she said, when she wound up first in the class.

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