

Hon. Maura D. Corrigan
**TRADING
SHOES**



MICHIGAN HALL OF JUSTICE

TRUTH

JUSTICE

In reflecting on the challenges and rewards of a career in public service, I am reminded of how I became a lawyer. It is often difficult to plan our lives and careers, and the place that we end up is not always what we had originally envisioned. To put it bluntly, no one is more surprised than I that I now serve as a justice of the Michigan Supreme Court.

I did not start college with the idea of becoming a lawyer. During the late 1960s, including the Detroit riot of 1968, I majored in sociology at Marygrove College, which was then an all-women's Catholic college in northwest Detroit. I definitely saw myself as a child of the sixties, on a mission to reform our society.

By pure coincidence, Sister Christina, I.H.M., the sociology department head at Marygrove College, assigned me to field work placement in the probation department in the former Detroit Recorder's Court. At that time, two young attorneys, Ken Cockrel and Justin Ravitz, were making names for themselves at the court. They saw the law as an agent of social change. Ken Cockrel went on to become a member of the Detroit City Council, while Justin Ravitz later became a recorder's court judge. I was impressed by their lawyering in the late 1960s. I concluded that lawyers had a greater ability to effect social change than did social workers. Their influence nudged me toward becoming a lawyer.

And something else made pursuing a law degree desirable: my father's opposition! My father thought it was wrong for a woman to take a man's seat in a professional school. Ever since high school, I had seriously thought about pursuing a profession. But in those days, conventional wisdom said that women should be teachers, social workers, or nurses. My father, who had six daughters, certainly shared the views of that time. I learned that if I decided to go to law school, I would be doing it on my own.

So, contrary to my father's views and the conventional wisdom of the day, I decided to try law school. I attended night classes and worked as a probation officer in recorder's court during the day. When I started law school at the University of Detroit, there were so few women in the law school that we could all study in an anteroom to the ladies' restroom! Happily, my male classmates were very supportive, much more so than I ever expected. I did well academically and also became the first woman elected president of the student bar.

After law school, I was lucky to be hired as a law clerk for Judge John Gillis of the Michigan Court of Appeals. Working for Judge Gillis was a great experience. He was an outstanding mentor and a wise man. He certainly had no bias against women lawyers. At the court of appeals, I became particularly interested in criminal cases,

and thereafter I was hired as an assistant prosecutor in the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office under the excellent guidance of Patricia Boyle, my direct boss in the appellate division, and Terrence Boyle, chief of the trial division. In 1979, Jim Robinson offered me a position as the chief of appeals in the United States Attorney's Office in Detroit. In 1986, I was promoted to chief assistant United States attorney under Roy Hayes.

In 1989, I joined the venerable law firm of Plunkett & Cooney. I enjoyed the work in the appellate division with the great lawyers who worked there. Certainly, the financial rewards were far greater than ever was the case in the public sector!

But then a couple of things happened. For one thing, it was virtually impossible for my clients to have their cases heard by the Michigan Court of Appeals. While federal cases would be scheduled for oral argument, the Michigan Court of Appeals was so backlogged that civil appeals were not being argued. My children think I'm a real geek, because I actually enjoy thinking about court rules and administration. The geek in me thought, "There has to be a way to deal with this backlog that is keeping the court of appeals from hearing cases in a timely manner." I started thinking about what I would do if I could solve this problem. I came up with a two-page list of procedural reforms that I thought would help alleviate the court's backlog.

And then I got a push, this time from my mother. Mothers are great for giving you a reality check and a big dose of humility when you need it most. I had been working very long hours at the firm, spending nights and weekends in the office. The Sunday before Christmas in 1991, I left my office in Detroit in the late afternoon only to find that my car had been stolen. I was irritated by the theft, but what truly bothered me was that I also lost a \$300 pair of Ferragamo shoes from the backseat! When I telephoned my mother that night to complain about losing the shoes, her response was swift: "Well, what would you be doing with a \$300 pair of shoes in the first place?"

That nudge from my mother made me recognize that something had gone awry in my values. And so, when Governor John Engler extended me an opportunity to become an appellate judge later that week, my answer was yes. I accepted the governor's appointment to

the Michigan Court of Appeals in March 1992. As it happened, the vacancy on the court arose because my old boss, Judge John Gillis, had decided to retire. I was elected in 1992 to fill the remainder of his term of office, and I ran again and was re-elected for a full term on the court in 1994.

In 1995, three years after I was first appointed to the court of appeals, my colleagues nominated me and the Supreme Court appointed me as chief judge of the court of appeals. The court of appeals judges and staff recognized the huge challenges and the need to address systematically the court's substantial backlog. Literally hundreds of thousands of new cases are filed in our trial courts each year. It's no surprise, then, that the Michigan Court of Appeals is an extremely busy court with a very high volume of cases. During my tenure as chief judge, we succeeded in improving the procedures on the court to reduce our backlog and ensure more timely decisions.

In 1998, I was elected to the Michigan Supreme Court. From 2001 to 2005, I served as chief justice of our Court, where I continued to work on improving how our court system serves the people. In Michigan's system of "one court of justice," the Supreme Court sets rules and procedures, not only for our own Court, but for all the courts in the state.

As one example, in an effort to improve trial court and appellate operations, we convened a work group of judges, court officials, and officials from the then Family Independence Agency to examine ways to improve adoption procedures. We know that people in Michigan want to adopt children and that children need homes, but the adoption process is often expensive, cumbersome, and time consuming. The work group's product resulted in both court rule and statutory changes.

Indeed, the problem of "youth at risk" is a nationwide problem that is a focus of the incoming president of the American Bar Association, Karen Mathis. President-Elect Mathis has noted that in most jurisdictions, a young person stops receiving foster care when he or she reaches the age of 18, and is sometimes cut off from other social services. I share President-Elect Mathis's concern about the problem of "18 and out." Sadly, the most vulnerable members of our society are left in an impossible position, a position in which they may lack both family and financial support.

Consider these chilling statistics taken from a study by Dr. Gary Anderson and Dr. Rosalind Folman of the Michigan State University School of Social Work: young adults aging out of foster care are 51 percent more likely to be unemployed, 27 percent more likely to be incarcerated, 42 percent more likely to be teenage parents, and 25 percent more likely to be homeless. Within four years, 60 percent of them will have had a child. Statistics also indicate that over half of these former foster youth will find themselves

back in the legal system within two years of "aging out." Other information indicates that these youth are at high risk for substance abuse, domestic violence, and poverty precisely because they lack the instruction and support that other young adults receive from parents and other adults. Not surprisingly, at a recent meeting of the statewide Permanency Planning Task Force, which I co-chair, the foster youth members of the task force said that having an adult mentor was hugely important to them. They now have their wish: all 20 foster youth now have mentors, many of whom are adult members of the task force! But many more foster children in Michigan are not as fortunate.

The problems facing "youth at risk" are sometimes brought to our Court's attention in devastatingly tragic ways. A 15-year-old girl named Heather Kish was murdered in Monroe. Heather had run away from a series of foster and group homes. But no one knew that Heather had run away, much less look for her. Her running away ultimately ended with her murder in 2002. When I learned about her murder, and about all the court wards who have run away from foster care without the system's knowledge, we decided to tackle the problem. The Supreme Court ordered all the state circuit courts to set up expedited dockets to help locate missing children and make sure they are safe. Each year since 2003, we have located 75 percent of the children who are missing from foster care.

So much work remains to be done. Tragedies often shed light on problems that we might not otherwise have known about. As lawyers and judges, we must be bold (to paraphrase our former governor, George Romney) in formulating and implementing solutions to these challenges.

Through all the stages of my career in public service, I have found both fulfillment and focus in trying to understand and address the challenging problems that face our great state. I never expected that my efforts would lead me to the Michigan Supreme Court, but I am privileged to serve the people of this state in confronting difficult issues that arise in our system of justice. ◆

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Maura D. Corrigan was elected to the Michigan Supreme Court in 1998 for an eight-year term. She was elected to a two-year term as chief justice in 2001 and re-elected in 2003. She was appointed to the Michigan Court of Appeals in 1992 and became its chief judge in 1997. Corrigan graduated magna cum laude from Marygrove College in Detroit in 1969 and cum laude from the University of Detroit Law School in 1973.