

The Counselors

Conversations with 18 courageous women who have changed the world, by Elizabeth Vrato, published by Running Press Book Publishers, 2002, hard cover, 218 pages, \$24.95

My initial reluctance to review *The Counselors, Conversations With 18 Courageous Women Who Have Changed The World*, by Elizabeth Vrato, stemmed not from the topic, but because the Forward is written by none other than former President Bill Clinton. In the end, however, it is the continual presence of the author, not Mr. Clinton, that detracts from her book.

After Mr. Clinton's introduction about the strong positive female role models in his own life, Ms. Vrato discusses the importance of role models and mentors in her own. She began researching this topic with the encouragement of her mentor, Jerome J. Shestack, while he was President of the American Bar Association. The author asked 18 recipients of the ABA's Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award what they would like to share with young women just beginning their careers.

The award was named for Margaret Brent, the first woman known to have pursued a legal profession in the United States. She and her brothers arrived in Maryland in 1683 with a family land grant. With her brothers' permission, she represented the family in court on matters concerning family property, and also made other court appearances. Her name appears over 100 times in Maryland court records—"Margaret Brent, Gentleman." There is no evidence of another female lawyer in the United States until the suffrage movement in the late nineteenth century.

While serving as the first chair of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, Hillary Clinton established the Margaret Brent Award in 1991 to recognize women in the legal field who have achieved excellence, influenced other women to pursue careers, and opened doors previously closed to women (page 5).

The interviewees include such public figures as United States Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader

Ginsburg, as well as women just as accomplished but not as well known, such as the President of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund Elaine Jones, and the President of General Motors Canada Maureen Kempston Darkes. There is a wealth of experience here, however its impact is diluted by the author's presentation of the material.

The author, a 1990 graduate of the New York University School of Law who presently works for the NOW Legal Defense Fund, allocates each Brent award recipient a short chapter in which to respond to questions posed by Ms. Vrato during one-on-one interviews. Preceding each short chapter is an italicized section containing Ms. Vrato's perspective, historical or personal, on the recipient. She frequently expresses her own excitement and awe about meeting the woman she is interviewing.

While I no doubt would feel the same way were I in her shoes, I am equally certain

changed man, and after he was fired from his job with the Veterans' Administration as a "security risk" and "blacklisted" during the McCarthy era (page 39). She learned of the importance of "some of us to be vigilant about protecting the rights and liberties of the rest of us." (page 39). U.S. District Court Judge Sarah T. Hughes mentored Ms. Raggio, and with Judge Hughes' assistance, Ms. Raggio became the first female assistant criminal district attorney in Dallas. While in private practice, Ms. Raggio formed a committee to rewrite laws that prohibited women from running businesses or controlling their own property after marriage. Ms. Raggio, now an octogenarian, describes the "I was a nerd" speech she gives at schools, emphasizing her own impoverished beginnings to convince students the only way to move up is to get good grades in school.

Before the chapter on Janet Reno, Ms. Vrato enthuses about how "surreal" it felt to

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this book would have been vastly more interesting if it contained more about the recipients, and less about Ms. Vrato. Ms. Vrato confesses a friend frequently questions the point of her stories by inquiring: "Relevance, Counselor?" I concur.

For example, in the section preceding the interview with Louise Raggio, a partner in the Dallas law firm Raggio & Raggio PLLC, Ms. Vrato treats the reader to her belief, while growing up in Philadelphia that Benjamin Franklin was "cool."

"So from time to time, brushing my teeth or getting ready for school, I used to think of Ben Franklin and label something I was going to do in school that day as 'good.'"

Ms. Raggio, born in 1919, decided to attend night law school, after her husband came home from World War II a frail and

be interviewing Ms. Reno. "Sure, my friends had been feeling sorry for me lately. Writing this book was requiring an awful lot of time and dedication. I needed to announce more and more often that it would be a 'lockdown' weekend, which meant I wouldn't make plans to go to the movies or dinner and unplugged the phone. I would stay home, listen to music, read, and write. (I plugged in the phone for pizza orders.) Lockdown weekends are not good exercise for the cardiovascular system or for the social life, but everything I got out of writing this book meant more to me than any sacrifice... Feeling like the luckiest woman alive, I was escorted into Janet Reno's office." (page 124).

All this is not to say Ms. Vrato can't write. She can. The pages on Janet Reno reflect Ms. Reno's strength and self-confidence. Justice

Ruth Bader Ginsburg describes her inability to find a job at a large law firm, even though she graduated first in her class at Harvard law school. Despite a strong recommendation from a Harvard Law professor, United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter reportedly said he wasn't ready to hire a woman as a law clerk. Instead, Justice Ginsburg clerked at a lower federal court, began teaching, and volunteered to litigate cases with the ACLU.

In the 1970s, Justice Ginsburg argued six and won five of the first cases regarding equal rights for women and men before the Supreme Court. She explained her strategy to use the law to abolish inequities, by choosing cases for sequential presentations before the Supreme Court to attack the most pervasive stereotype in the law at the time—that men are independent and women are men's dependents. Justice Ginsburg brings the people behind those significant cases to life.

Another theme is success despite significant obstacles and detours. Joyce Kennard was born on the island of Java and spent her early years in an internment camp with her mother. She was educated at a tiny missionary-run school, which closed when she was 13. Her mother was determined that her daughter receive an education, and moved with her to New Guinea, then to Holland. She missed so much school when a tumor caused her to have a leg amputated; she left school and became a secretary at age 16. Her mother urged her to go to America when a special immigration quota opened up for people of Dutch nationality who were displaced from New Guinea when it changed from Dutch to Indonesian rule. After her mother died and left her an inheritance of \$3,000, Ms. Kennard became a college freshman at the University of California at age 27, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude three years later. She was

appointed to the California Supreme Court in 1989.

The book concludes with a list of all Margaret Brent Award recipients, and the last section contains the author's promise to donate a portion of any proceeds from book sales to several organizations and causes related to her book, from the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, to the Families for Freedom Scholarship fund (started by Bob Dole and Bill Clinton), and offering educational assistance for children or spouses of those killed or permanently disabled as a result of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.

By all means read about the women who have received the Margaret Brent Women Lawyer's Achievement Award. They are inspirational. Just skip the sections in italics. ◆

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