

Series: CHICAGO'S 100

Series: CHICAGO'S 100 MOST POWERFUL WOMEN Top 10 in Law

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No. 6

ANITA ALVAREZ

Cook County State's Attorney Chief Deputy

The highest-ranking woman in the office, Alvarez, 44, is in charge of the day-to-day operations of more than 970 prosecutors and a \$108 million budget. She has been with the office since 1986, rising through the ranks as supervisor of the public integrity unit, deputy chief of the narcotics bureau, bureau chief of special prosecutions and Dick Devine's chief of staff. Her most famous case was the 1997 conviction of Girl X rapist Patrick Sykes. The daughter of Mexican immigrants, she was the first in her family to attend college.

No. 1

Mary Ann McMorrow, chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, threw caution and her robe to the wind. She went to a Rod Stewart concert. Never mind that McMorrow, 74, who prefers the theater and opera, had never been to a rock concert in her life, let alone known who Rod Stewart was.

Her daughter bought the tickets for the February concert after McMorrow saw Stewart perform on the Oprah show.

Throughout the concert, the stately woman with the silver bob was on her feet in her pantsuit, dancing and clapping to the beat.

"It was packed," she said. "Everybody was jumping around, and you find yourself so engrossed in it that you're doing the same thing."

She may have been just another fan that night, but for most of her life, McMorrow has set herself apart from the crowd.

She was the first woman in her graduating class at Loyola Law, the first woman to prosecute major felonies in the Cook County state's attorney's office and the first woman elected to the Illinois Supreme Court. In 2002, she became its first female chief justice, making \$158,000 a year.

But for all the glass ceilings she has shattered and all the power she wields on the state's highest court, McMorrow maintains an unassuming profile, conscious of the strides she has made for women in the profession but content not to dwell on them.

"I never had being a first as my goal, never, for any of the firsts I've had. I've always said and I've always believed that I wanted to do the best job that I possibly could," she says, sitting in her uncluttered 20th-story chambers on La Salle Street, where she works when she is not in Springfield hearing cases. The court convenes every second month, except in the summer.

Her colleagues, past and present, say McMorrow is a study in balance on the bench: tough, congenial and fair.

"She gets to the heart of the matter in her questions . . . so you better know what you're going to say," says former Gov. Jim Thompson, who worked with McMorrow in the state's attorney's office and has argued three cases before her in the Supreme Court in recent years.

McMorrow's name is attached to some of the court's more notable cases.

She wrote the opinion in the 1997 Best vs. Taylor case, striking down legislation that limited how much money injured people could recover in court.

She was the lone dissenting voice, later joined by Justice Ben Miller, in the contentious 1995 Baby Richard case in which the court ordered the adopted child immediately handed over to the biological father without a custody hearing on the best interest of the child.

McMorrow says she originally agreed with the majority in that case but changed her mind when it came up for a rehearing. She stands by her belief that a custody hearing should have been held.

“I think the majority was clearly wrong, and I think the case law supported the position that I took,” she said.

Off the bench, those who know her say she is one of the most likeable people around — the type who asks how you’re doing and means it, who gets together regularly with her high school girlfriends, who volunteers at soup kitchens and once lent her robe to be used for a bar association’s annual holiday show.

“She’s a very warm person, and she’s very interested in you,” said Justice Rita Garman, the only other woman on the state Supreme Court.

While Garman’s husband recovered from a kidney transplant recently, McMorrow called often to offer her help, Garman says.

The two women occupy neighboring sleeping quarters above the courtroom in Springfield. Garman is an early riser, while McMorrow is a night owl.

“She’s always saying to me, ‘Do you hear me? Do I bother you?’” Garman says.

When she is home, McMorrow dines out several times a week with her sister and daughter. They rotate among their favorite haunts, Petterino’s, Rosebud on Taylor Street, Kiki’s Bistro, anywhere McMorrow can satisfy her sweet tooth.

The “prim and proper” one

McMorrow is a middle child.

One might be inclined, then, to think of her as a natural mediator, destined for a career in law.

But the thought never crossed her mind growing up in the 1940s because women didn’t pursue such careers back then, she says.

She grew up in a Catholic household on the Northwest Side. Her parents, Roman Grohwin, a wholesale meat dealer, and Emily, a homemaker, were strict about giving their kids a solid education.

While her younger sister Frances and older brother Roman were more athletic, McMorrow was the “prim and proper” one, Frances said.

She practiced hours at a time on the piano and had lovely penmanship. She read biographies and debated current events with her friends, a habit that prompted her mom to first suggest law as a career. About the only thing she had much trouble with at all-girls Immaculata High School was tumbling, but that was because she was 5 feet, 10 inches.

“In all honesty, Mary Ann was always the brightest and in many ways the most talented. Of course, we never told her that growing up,” says Frances Grohwin, a retired teacher and dentistry professional.

McMorrow attended Rosary College, now known as Dominican University, and Loyola Law School, where she was the only female graduate in 1953.

She worked for one year in private practice before joining the state’s attorney’s office, where she worked in women’s court, juvenile court and the criminal division.

She prosecuted virtually every kind of crime, from robbery to murder. She recalls her time with the office in typically understated fashion.

“I enjoyed the work. It was diverse enough to be exciting,” she says.

There was the time during her stint in women’s court when she went up against a “gallant” Hugh Hefner in a case involving an underage Playboy centerfold.

“We charged her mom and Hefner with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I had to prove that the girl who was in the picture was the daughter of this woman,” she says. The case was eventually tossed out, but, she says, “Every time I see him on TV, I remember him from 11th and State.”

Of her conviction of legendary jewelry thief Joseph “Pops” Panczko, she says, “He was a delight. He was one of the nicest criminals I prosecuted.”

The two exchanged pleasantries after Panczko was sentenced and being led out of the courtroom.

But McMorrow was charming only to a point, Thompson said.

“In her prosecutorial mode, she was tough. She was smart. She had a very clear idea of what she was going to prove and how she was going to prove it,” Thompson said.

McMorrow met the love of her life while in the state’s attorney’s office, a Chicago police officer named Emmett McMorrow.

They married in 1962 and had their only child, a daughter, in 1963. Emmett insisted they name her Mary Ann.

Tall, thick-chested and outgoing, Emmett was a good match for his more reserved wife. They had the same sense of humor. Their first Thanksgiving as a married couple, they hosted the family dinner. McMorrow wasn’t much of a cook, so they catered a turkey and put it in the oven so the smells would waft through the house. The other women were rightly suspicious until the couple owned up to their culinary caper.

“They put on a pretty good show,” Frances Grohwin said.

McMorrow left the state’s attorney’s office to raise her daughter. They bought a home in Edgebrook a block from McMorrow’s mother.

McMorrow’s daughter, now 40 and a clinical neuropsychologist in Chicago, says her mother taught her to be sure of herself.

“She was a good role model for being tall, [saying] it’s a good thing, not to be hunched over,” she said.

McMorrow went into private practice when Mary Ann was in grade school. That’s when her colleagues and her husband, who knew a lot of people, started talking her into running for judge.

“I wasn’t too keen about running initially because I was very content with my professional and family life,” she said. “Finally, I decided I’ll try it.”

She practiced her speech for the Democratic slatemakers in her kitchen, timing it to four minutes.

But when it came time to give her speech, she was worried because the panel kept reducing the allotted time for candidates until they were down to one minute.

“I thought, I can’t do that. So I went in and just did the whole four minutes, and no one cut me off,” she said. “I told the slatemakers it would behoove both political parties to slate more women.”

They agreed. McMorrow was elected to the circuit court in 1976.

In 1986, she was elected to the state appellate court.

But it was her worst year, too. Her husband died of cancer. She also lost her mother and mother-in-law.

“That’s a void that would never be filled for either of us,” the younger McMorrow says of her dad’s death. “But my mom has such strong faith. I think she very much accepts that things happen for a reason. She still misses my dad very much.”

Sisterhood pulled McMorrow through her losses. Already a tight-knit trio, she grew even closer to her daughter and sister. Her girlfriends, meanwhile, encouraged her to run for the Supreme Court.

She lost the race in 1990. She wasn’t about to try again when another vacancy came up two years later, but her friends — among them, the late Esther Rothstein, the first female president of the Chicago Bar Association, former federal judge Susan Getzendanner and Circuit Court Judge Nancy Arnold — kept pushing. She had the civil and criminal experience and high ratings from lawyers’ groups, they told her.

In 1992, she won and became the first female Illinois Supreme Court justice.

She faced some controversy in 2000 with a federal investigation into how the justices appoint lawyers to fill temporary vacancies on the bench. The probe centered on the appointment of Circuit Court Judge George J.W. Smith, appointed by Justice Charles Freeman and reappointed by McMorrow. Smith was accused of buying his seat and was later convicted of financial fraud. McMorrow, who stands by her appointments, named an independent committee to screen lawyers appointed to temporary judgeships.

Double dose of discrimination

In her ascent in what was then a man's world, McMorrow says she felt discriminated against as a female lawyer only twice.

When she was a Cook County prosecutor, she had prepared for months to argue a case before the state Supreme Court but was yanked at the last minute by her male supervisor, who told her women couldn't argue before the Supreme Court. The other time was when she wrote to a big downtown law firm asking for a job interview.

"The partner who interviewed people said to me, 'We've never had women in this firm, we don't have a woman now and we never will.' I was surprised he invited me in with that attitude. And I said, 'Thank you, I wouldn't want to work here anyway,' she recalls.

Both men have since passed away.

"And I really wished they could see how things turned out," she says.

No. 2

ILANA ROVNER

Judge on the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals

Rovner, 65, was appointed to the federal appeals court in Chicago in 1992, the first female in that post, after eight years on the federal bench. She was the first female supervisor in the U.S. attorney's office and served for seven years as deputy governor and legal counsel to Gov. Jim Thompson. She earned her law degree from Chicago-Kent, which has a scholarship and a moot court competition in her name. A native of Latvia, she escaped the Nazis as a child and fought off cancer as an adult.

No. 3

ANN CLAIRE WILLIAMS

Judge on the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals

Williams, 54, was the first African-American woman to be a federal judge in Illinois and, in 1999, became the first African American on the 7th Circuit. She is past president of the Federal Judges Association, a group of more than 800 judges focused on issues of pay and independence of the judiciary. A Detroit native and former federal prosecutor in Chicago, she co-founded Minority Legal Education Resources, which prepares law students for the bar exam, and the Just the Beginning Foundation, an arts and education group honoring black judges.

No. 4

DIANE WOOD

Judge on the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals

Wood, 53, was appointed to the 7th Circuit in 1995, after two years with the U.S. Justice Department as deputy assistant attorney general in the antitrust division. Considered an intellectual powerhouse on the bench, she has had ties to the University of Chicago Law School going back to the 1980s as a professor, associate dean and currently a senior lecturer in international economic law and civil procedure. She is an accomplished oboe and English horn player in several amateur orchestras.

No. 5

ANNE BURKE

Illinois Appellate Court Judge

Burke, 60, has been on the appellate court since 1995. A longtime advocate for children and the disabled, she founded the Chicago Special Olympics in 1968. She chairs the lay National Review Board of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops investigating clergy sex abuse in the Catholic Church. Formerly an Illinois Court of Claims judge, she was special counsel to Gov. Jim Edgar on child welfare, credited with improving relationships between the Department of Children and Family Services and law enforcement and modernizing the technology to track child abuse.

No. 7

MARA GEORGES

City of Chicago corporation counsel

Since 1999, Georges, 40, has run the day-to-day operations of the city's Law Department as chief legal adviser to Mayor Daley and manager of more than 270 lawyers, a budget of more than \$40 million and a litigation fund of \$36 million. She was previously a litigation partner with the law firm of former Illinois Senate President Philip J. Rock. She is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and Loyola Law.

No. 9

COLLEEN CONNELL

Executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois

Connell, 49, has led the Illinois ACLU since 2001 and is a constant presence testifying before lawmakers in Springfield and speaking to law schools and bar groups. Much of her work in the courts was as head of the ACLU's Reproductive Rights Project in the '80s and '90s, when she challenged bans on partial-birth abortion and Medicaid funding for medically necessary abortions. She has a law degree from the University of Iowa and was a litigation associate with Jenner & Block.

No. 10

PATRICIA BOBB

President of Patricia C. Bobb & Associates

Bobb, 56, handles medical malpractice and product liability cases for her 19-year-old firm and is of counsel to Propes and Kaveny, another personal injury firm. She is a former assistant state's attorney who prosecuted John Wayne Gacy and Patty Columbo, and a past president of the Chicago Bar Association. She is on the Chicago Police Board and the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission, which investigate allegations of misconduct. A regent with the American College of Trial Lawyers, she recently completed a nine-year term as chairwoman of the state Supreme Court Rules Committee.

ILLUSTRATION

Mary Ann McMorrow was the first woman elected to the Illinois Supreme Court. In 2002, she became its first female chief justice. When Mary Ann McMorrow isn't in Springfield, she works in her uncluttered 20th-story chambers on La Salle.

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