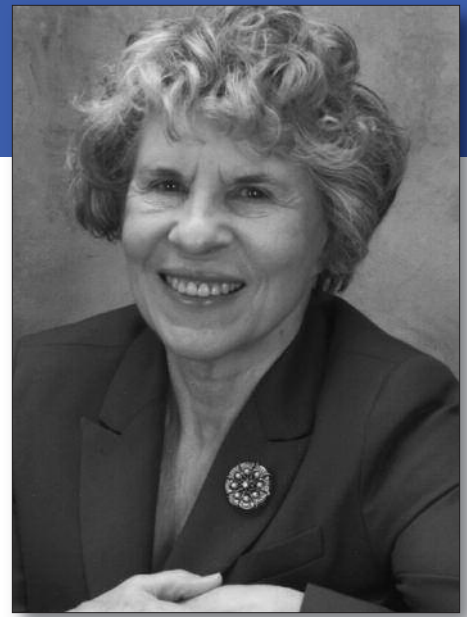


Esther Tomljanovich



Justice Esther Tomljanovich grew up in a rural area near a small town in the Iron Range, a series of tight-knit, working class communities strung along several iron ore formations in northern Minnesota. Her family struggled to scratch out a living in their modest home that lacked electricity and running water. Educated in a one-room country schoolhouse, Justice Tomljanovich developed a great love of reading. Every year, she would read every one of the 100 books in the local library. At age 19, she left the Iron Range after attending a local college to enroll in law school. Arriving in St. Paul by bus, she took a room at the YMCA and enrolled in the St. Paul College of Law. She graduated in 1955, the only woman in her class.

After graduation, Justice Tomljanovich landed a position as assistant revisor of statutes for the Minnesota legislature and was later appointed the first woman to serve as the state revisor of statutes. In 1977, Governor Rudy Perpich appointed her as the second woman district court judge to serve in the state of Minnesota. Over the next 13 years, she earned a reputation as an erudite, fair-minded, and compassionate judge. Her leadership abilities were soon recognized by her colleagues, and they elected her as the first woman assistant chief judge in Minnesota. In 1990, she was appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court, where she was part of the nation's first female majority on a state's highest court. In this role, she demonstrated an effort to balance the interests of society in both individual freedom and public order. Her small-town upbringing helped to ground her in the everyday lives and needs of working people. Her struggles as a woman working her way through a male-dominated profession affected her penchant to take a relatively moderate approach to legal issues.

Justice Tomljanovich's support of women has been abundant throughout her career. In 1965, she served on Minnesota Governor Rolvaag's Commission on the Status of Women in an early effort to identify and remedy gender discrimination. She was among the founders in 1972 of the Minnesota Women Lawyers (MWL) and has remained a member for 35 years. In 1997, the MWL honored her with its Myra Bradwell Award. She is a past president and 40-year member of the St. Paul Business and Professional Women's Association. She was a moving force on the

William Mitchell College of Law Women and the Law Committee and a mentor to countless law students, founding scholarships for women. She was chair and eight-year member of the Governor's Judicial Selection Commission, where she called for the appointment of qualified women to the bench. During her tenure, the number of women judges increased from 15 to 42. She served as chair of the Implementation Committee of the Minnesota Supreme Court Task Force on Gender Fairness in the Courts, which works to increase the court's focus on family violence and the needs of women in corrections.

Justice Tomljanovich's work, in particular on the Female Offender Task Force, is an example of her sense of fairness and compassion. She recognized that many female defendants are, to a certain extent, victims and that the key to success was not incarceration and lengthy probation but programming to give them opportunities to better themselves. Out of her efforts came a program entitled Expanded Life Choices, offered through community corrections to many women defendants to address educational, vocational, and social issues. It gave these women some hope in a rather hopeless situation.

Justice Tomljanovich has influenced numerous women to pursue legal careers. She has mentored many women, including her judicial law clerks and women students at the William Mitchell College of Law. Not only has she, by her example, demonstrated what women can achieve, she also has been a tireless public advocate for gender equity in the profession.

Now retired from the bench, she serves on the boards of directors of Medica Health Plans and Insurance Companies.