

# Ruth Cooper Burg



Judge Ruth Cooper Burg graduated from George Washington University in 1945 on a full scholarship with a degree in chemistry and the intention of becoming a physician. She attended one year of medical school but obtained a two-year leave

of absence from the dean (in a letter addressed not to her but to her father) when she married her first husband, an accountant. After working for a year at the Naval Research Center abstracting and indexing papers from the famous Manhattan Project, Judge Burg decided upon a career in law, not medicine, and enrolled in the George Washington University Law School. She served as taxation editor of the *George Washington Law Review*, was elected to the Order of the Coif, and graduated first in her class in 1950, the first woman to do so.

Upon graduation, Judge Burg became the first woman hired as an attorney advisor to a judge on the U.S. Tax Court. When the Department of Justice refused to hire her because of her sex, she hung out her shingle as a solo tax law practitioner, renting office space with a door at the rear entrance of a large law firm in Washington, D.C. During the next 12 years, her practice flourished, and Judge Burg developed an expertise in construction tax law, working closely with the male CEOs of the construction companies involved in the building boom that had exploded in the Washington, D.C. area. At the same time, she became the mother of a boy and then a girl. In 1964, however, tragedy struck when her husband died of heart disease. At just 38 years old, Judge Burg found herself a widow and mother of two small children.

Judge Burg accepted a position as the first woman legal assistant to the chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission Board of Contract Appeals (later to be incorporated into the Department of Energy). The position was one of two in a pilot program to attract women lawyers that had just been implemented by the Commission's general counsel at the persuasion of Mary Bunting, a member

of the Commission and former president of Radcliffe College. It allowed Judge Burg to draw upon both her science background and her legal training. While at the Commission, she married a widower, a physician world-renowned for his medical research who had two children, making her the mother of four.

In 1972, Judge Burg became the first woman appointed an administrative judge on the Armed Services Board of Contract Appeals, a specialty forum designated by Congress to decide government contract cases from which appeals are taken to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. She served as a jurist on the Board until her retirement following successful cancer surgery in 1995.

During that period, Judge Burg became increasingly active in related public contract law bar activities. In 1984, despite the objection of officials within the Department of Defense, she became the first woman chair of the American Bar Association Section of Public Contract Law. She has been elected a Fellow of the American Bar Association. She also used her prominent position as a judge to encourage the few women who were then government contract lawyers, both in private practice and with the government, to join forces and enlist the aid of their male counterparts in expanding the opportunities for women. For 25 years, she has actively promoted women within the section and mentored them as they earned leadership positions. In recognition of these activities the ABA Public Contract Law Section has created the Ruth Cooper Burg Luncheon for Women in Public Contract Law and awarded her the Section Fellows Leadership Award.

By the time Judge Burg retired, six of the 35 judges at the Armed Services Board were women. She is the recipient of numerous professional awards, including the Star of the Bar award from the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia, the Fulbright Award for Public Service from the George Washington University Law School Alumni, the Beatrice Rosenberg Award for Public Service from the District of Columbia Bar Association, and the George Washington University Distinguished Alumni Award.

For relaxation she enjoys fly-fishing with her husband, doing needlepoint, and weaving.