It is with great pride in her accomplishments and equal sadness at her passing that the Section of Taxation of the American Bar Association honors Christine Brunswick, the Section’s cherished Executive Director, with its 2013 Distinguished Service Award.

Although the award is presented posthumously, Christine was informed of her selection shortly before her untimely death earlier this year.

The Section fairly lays claim to being the finest volunteer organization of its kind anywhere, serving with tenacity both the professional goals of its members and the betterment of our nation’s taxing system. Whether by supplying dozens of technical comments annually to the Treasury and Internal Revenue Service, conducting educational meetings attended by thousands, leading the cause of tax reform through simplification, or advocating IRS funding adequate to its mission, the Section’s role in the tax system has become unique and important.

For nearly 30 years Christine Brunswick has been the principal guiding force in shaping the Section’s fortunes, managing both Section leadership and Section staff with grace, aplomb, efficiency, and above all, great and good humor. The tone she set became pervasive, nurturing a spirit of cooperation amid goodwill, the sense of belonging to something worthwhile, and the willingness to work hard to achieve success. Under Christine’s stewardship, Council dinners became delightful occasions facilitating a dialogue between Section leaders and Government guests intended to shape the improvement of tax policy and administration. Section meetings became “must-attend” events for continuing education, government personnel interaction, and the nurturing of friendships. Section submissions were managed seamlessly, and the Section’s voice was heard in the right places, on the right subjects, and at the right time.

Christine’s manner was one of complete competence whatever the stress level, enveloped by a gloss of endless patience. Former Chair Jerry Cohen observes that she could answer a question for the tenth time, quietly and accurately, with the same grace as she had the first time. She was so utterly in charge that incoming Section Chairs viewed her as a Co-Chair. Her command of the Section’s history was full and her ability to summon relevant detail impressive. Chris mentored generations of Tax Section staff, and watched them bloom. She likewise counseled generations of Council Directors and Section Officers in the ways of the ABA, and the need to subordinate oneself to the best interests of the Section. Her years of service produced many friendships, all of them treasured and enduring.

Christine was a superior delegator, recruiting and training able personnel then entrusting them to perform to her expectations. Her dear friend, National Taxpayer Advocate Nina Olson, attributes this to her formative years when, according to her brothers, she figured out how to get them to do the household chores so she could read and study, demonstrating executive leadership in its early form.
One of Christine’s major responsibilities was to manage the Section’s often testy relationship with the ABA headquarters staff in Chicago, a role for which she was well-suited and which she acquitted admirably. She fought vigorously for the Section’s independence, regularly securing far better hotel rates for our members, more attractive venues, better treatment for her personnel, and above all the Section’s ability to make government submissions without bureaucratic interference. This was not done without stress, which she met in characteristic fashion, once joining several members of the Section in a secret Betsy Ross committee which produced a large Tax Section flag, replete with Section blue trim, employing a “Don’t Tread on Me” motif and other features not wholly deferential to ABA headquarters. That Section flag never flew over the White House, or for that matter anywhere else. But in our mind’s eye, it flies today as a tribute to Christine’s independence, having dutifully flown at half staff on the day in February that we lost her.

The Section is proud of its strong commitment to the values of diversity, and Christine was an early and vigorous force, particularly in the advancement of women in the profession, not an easy thing in a tax bar that not so long ago consisted largely of graying white men. Christine was a change agent; her passion infected the process, for at every turn it was Christine who would ask the pointed question, focus on the healthy direction. She managed a deft touch that felt to the men’s club of the time a perfect combination of love and disdain.

Stylistically, Christine would chew on a problem, seemingly interminably, but once she decided would move with dispatch. Her network was extensive and, in her capacity as chief problem-solver for the Section, she never hesitated to call on members of that network to move a good idea forward. She was a devoted champion of many new ideas that became embedded to the credit of the Section; low-income taxpayer clinic fellowships, the VITA program, the Janet R. Spragens Pro Bono Award, international conferences, and the Nolan Fellows program to inspire the best of young tax lawyers, all found Christine’s vigorous support.

Christine was not at all bashful about regaling us with tales of her greatest role in life, that of Mom. The Section was enough of her world that for decades we heard about Daniel growing up, where Daniel is going to school, where he is going to practice law, and whether that young man will find a wife. There was great joy in witnessing Christine’s pride in Daniel, and it bonded us to her in ways that made the Section akin to family for so many.

Notable among Christine’s accomplishments was her role as long term breast cancer survivor, advocate, and counselor. She defeated her first recurrence and succumbed only to her second. In the intervening decades she was indefatigable. A leader since inception of the National Breast Cancer Coalition, in her public role she was a media spokesperson, international conference speaker, and organization executive. In her private persona, she would routinely drop everything to spend hours on the phone, counseling the latest “friend of a friend” victim through the turmoil of diagnosis, treatment options, and fear management, all with an empathy borne of thoroughgoing understanding.

For sure, Chris was great fun, an eager but talent-challenged karaoke performer, a lover of fine food and wines. A vivid and not atypical memory has Christine out on a warm summer night, after a perfectly delightful dinner in Georgetown, walking the entire route back to the Grand Hyatt, weaving along as the personal guide to a Section Chair and Vice Chair whose judgmental processes had concluded that to be a good idea. Maybe that is how the scene best ends for Christine, at the end of the trail, waiflike, carrying her purse in one hand, shoes in the other, strolling leisurely into the evening, still doing her job but having a grand old time.

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