

ABA SECTION OF TAXATION

2018 DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD RECIPIENT

SUSAN P. SEROTA



The *Distinguished Service Award* is the highest honor awarded by the Section of Taxation of the American Bar Association. The award is reserved for individuals who have had a distinguished career in taxation and who have provided an aspirational standard for all tax lawyers to emulate. The 2018 recipient of this award – **Susan P. Serota** – is a trailblazer who has been a leader in her law firm, in the field of employee benefits, and in the organized bar.

CHICAGO UPBRINGING

Susan was born in Chicago, Illinois. Her father was a partner at a Chicago law firm and practiced until he was 89. Her mother was a social worker and managed to raise Susan and her older brother, Harry Perlstadt, until she died when Susan was 13. Her father remarried a pediatric cardiologist who instilled in Susan a desire for a professional career.

Susan's hometown explains some of her passions. She was, is, and always will be a Cubs fan, notwithstanding that she has lived in the shadow of Yankee Stadium for years. And she is a true fan of Chicago hot dogs and the Art Institute of Chicago. Indeed, when she recently visited some old friends in Northern California and was near a stand where they sold Chicago-style hot dogs, Susan had to stop and "feed her passion."

Susan met her husband, Jamie, who is also a lawyer, in 1971 at the Illinois bar review course. They were married in 1972 and have two sons, Daniel and Jonathan. They travel internationally and enjoy spending time in Bermuda, where they have a second home located on a world-class golf course. Recently, they have spent winters in Santa Monica near their younger son. They have three granddaughters, and Susan is anxiously awaiting the birth of her first grandson, who is due in September.



2018

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Susan graduated from the University of Michigan, where she earned a degree in history and served as the business manager of the student newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*. (She remains a loyal fan of the Maize and Blue football team, with a passion rivaled only by her love for the Cubs.) She went on to the New York University School of Law, graduating in 1971. After law school, Susan practiced in Chicago for a year with Gottlieb & Schwartz before moving to Washington, D.C., where she practiced for three years with Silverstein & Mullins, a tax boutique firm, while her husband worked for the Department of Justice. Susan moved with Jamie to New York in 1975 to join Cahill, Gordon & Reindel, spending time in their Washington and New York offices between 1975 and 1982. She then joined the New York firm of Winthrop, Stimson, Putnam & Roberts in 1982 to head up their employee benefits practice. She has stayed at Winthrop ever since, although the firm eventually merged with other firms to become Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP. She headed the executive compensation and benefits practice at Winthrop and Pillsbury for over 35 years.

A LEADER IN THE LAW

In 1972, Susan started to work in the tax/pensions law practice of Silverstein & Mullins. She went into the employee benefits field

willingly because her father also practiced in that area. Of course, timing is everything – ERISA was enacted when the number of women lawyers was on the rise – and Susan was one of the first to be known as an ERISA attorney, and she has focused on pensions, executive compensation and employee benefits throughout her career.

Susan is extremely well known in the employee benefits world. She has authored a treatise on ERISA fiduciary law and has written numerous articles and spoken around the world on U.S. employee benefits law. She served as a member of the IRS Advisory Commission on TE/GE from 2008 to 2011. She is a charter member of the American College of Employee Benefits Counsel and was its president from 2004-2005. Susan served as a Regent of the American College of Tax Counsel from 2000 through 2005. In addition, she serves as an officer and director of the American Tax Policy Institute. She is the founder and past chair of the International Pension and Employee Benefits Lawyers Association. She was appointed by the Treasury Department to serve as a delegate to the National Summit on Retirement Savings in 1998 and 2002.

Susan also has served on numerous boards, including the board for Tax Management, Inc. since 1986, and the NYU School of Law Center for Labor and Employment Law since 1999. She was on the board of Legal Momentum (formerly known as the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund) – the oldest legal advocacy group for women in the United States, which is dedicated to the advancement of women's rights – from 2002 to 2014. She also served as a member of the ALI/ABA Employee Benefits Advisory Panel.

SERVICE TO THE PROFESSION

Susan joined the ABA Tax Section in 1978, when she attended her first meeting and joined the Employee Benefits Committee, one of the Section's largest and most active committees. In 1988 she chaired the Joint Committee on Employee Benefits. She then chaired the Employee Benefits Committee from 1992 to 1993. From there, Susan was elected to serve as a Council Director in 1994 and as Vice-Chair, Professional Services from 1999 to 2001. She served as the second female Chair of the Section from 2006 to 2007. Susan

continued her deep commitment to the Section by then serving as one of the Section's two delegates (and first female delegate) to the ABA House of Delegates from 2011 to 2015. In this role, she helped present the Section's position on several issues confronting the ABA.

During her term as Chair of the Section, Susan focused on growth of the Section, working to bring younger lawyers into the Section and expanding the Section's efforts to recruit and retain diverse lawyers into the Section's membership. With Susan's leadership, the Section's mission statement was updated to read as follows: "The mission of the ABA Section of Taxation is to lead and serve our members, the legal profession and the public to achieve an equitable and efficient tax system." Although the wording has been revised in recent years, the essence remains the same. With the hard work and perseverance of the leaders of tomorrow – many of whom joined the Section when Susan was Chair – the aspirations that Susan pursued as Chair might finally become reality, just like the World Series that Susan's beloved Cubbies finally won two years ago.

Susan also used her legal expertise to assist the ABA. She was a member of the American Bar Retirement Association board from 1994 to 2004, serving as President in 1999-2000. She also has served as outside counsel to the ABA's own pension committee, which administers the pension plan for the employees of the ABA and its affiliated entities. In this role, she assists that committee in assuring that it is in fiduciary compliance.

Susan has made many contributions to the ABA and the Tax Section, but perhaps her greatest contributions have been as a role model and mentor for younger lawyers. One lawyer who worked with her expressed his gratitude for how she both educated him and worked with him. Another lawyer commented that Susan has a big brain and an even bigger heart. Susan is always quick with a smile and a laugh, and she can discuss serious topics in a manner which is both disarming and insightful. Most importantly, as those who have dealt with her can aver, she almost never loses an argument because of her ability to combine reasoning with the human touch.

— Richard M. Lipton, Chicago, IL
— Armando Gomez, Washington, DC