Judge Consuelo B. Marshall was born and raised in segregated Tennessee at a time when very few women dared to even dream of becoming lawyers, let alone judges. Yet, Judge Marshall not only dreamed of becoming a lawyer, she went on to achieve so much more. In the 1940s and 1950s, with no lawyers or judges in her family, she looked to the great activists and attorneys of the time, who were often prominent civil rights figures, as worthy examples leading her to choose the legal profession.

After two years of schooling at Los Angeles City College, she moved east to finish her undergraduate education at Howard University. She soon realized that law was the right fit and continued her education at Howard University Law School. She graduated third in her class and served as editor of the law journal.

Interestingly, some of the very professors who educated her did not believe women should practice law. Despite naysayers, she persevered and, in 1962, became the first woman hired as a lawyer by the Los Angeles City Attorney’s office where she began her career as Deputy City Attorney. This would the first of an astonishing collection of “firsts” during her legal profession.

Five years later, she was offered a position in private practice. As a working mother, she wanted additional flexibility, so she accepted an offer to practice with Cochran & Atkins and worked as a referee in Juvenile Court on an as-needed basis. This small move proved to have a significant impact ultimately launching her career in the courts.

In 1971, Judge Marshall left private practice and became a Superior Court Commissioner. She quickly rose through the judicial ranks. Five years later, she was appointed as a judge to the Inglewood Municipal Court and shortly thereafter she was appointed as a judge in the Los Angeles Superior Court.

In 1980, Judge Marshall was appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. She was the first woman of color to become an Article III federal judge in that district and the ninth woman of color nationwide. Finally, in 2001, she became the first woman to serve as Chief Judge of the Central District of California.

Judge Marshall has handled many high-profile federal cases, including the Heidi Fleiss case. After imposing sentence, Judge Marshall wished Fleiss well, saying, “When you are released from custody, hopefully you’ll do many of the things you’ve dreamed about. I believe you’ll be a positive role model for other young women just by the experiences you’ve had.” Her kind words speak volumes about the woman behind the accolades. One of her many mentees described her as both “down-to-earth” and “approachable.”

Judge Marshall’s kind and generous nature carries over into her work outside the courtroom. Since 2006, she has worked with the ABA Section of Litigation’s JIOP program, a multi-racial nonprofit organization comprised of lawyers and judges dedicated to developing and nurturing young persons who are interested in the law and who come from various ethnic backgrounds under-represented in the legal profession. She also encourages other judges in the Ninth Circuit as well as state court judges to be active in the program.

She participates in the annual Summer Legal Institute in Los Angeles, which is modeled on the Just the Beginning Foundation program in Chicago. The Summer Legal Institute introduces high school students to the legal profession, educates them on legal concepts and the practice of law, and inspires them to participate in the legal profession. Students are mentored and offered programs on college admissions, financial aid and legal topics. Judge Marshall credits these programs as one of the highlights of her judicial career.

Another highlight of Judge Marshall’s judicial career is her work in the international legal community. From 2006–2017, she chaired the Ninth Circuit Pacific Island Committee, which oversees training of judges for the Pacific Islands of Guam, Saipan, Palau, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. She is an active member of the International Association of Women Judges, has served as a delegate to the Pacific Judicial conferences in Vanuatu, Tonga, French Polynesia, the Solomon Islands, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, and has lectured in Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Yugoslavia, Italy and Greece.

Representation is an important part of encouraging the next generation to believe they can achieve their dreams, and Judge Marshall is certainly an excellent blueprint. While her many accomplishments in her legal career make her an excellent role model to aspiring women lawyers, especially women of color, it is her humble demeanor and willingness to actively give back to her community that truly sets her apart. The Commission could not be prouder to honor her with the Margaret Brent Award.