Hon. Judith McConnell

Administrative Presiding Justice Judith McConnell was the first woman Presiding Judge of a major metropolitan court in California. She was appointed to the California Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division One in 2001, served as Administrative Presiding Justice of the Fourth Appellate District since 2003, and served for 23 years as a trial judge in San Diego. She is now a member of the San Diego Women’s Hall of Fame.

Justice McConnell received a J.D. degree in 1969 from the University of California, Berkeley Law, and a B.A. degree in 1966 from the University of California, Berkeley, where she was awarded Phi Beta Kappa. She overcame significant obstacles to achieve professional success afterwards, as she suffered sexist comments, inquiries, and rejections. She showed great courage and independence by frequently taking her baby to the office, and according to her male supervisor, “McConnell is able to take care of the baby and carry on whatever work assignments [have] to be done with no problem.”

Her choice to devote her time to women’s organizations and the advancement of women exemplifies the vision she has for her career and influence, and the path she creates for herself and others. In 1970, Justice McConnell was a founding member of the San Diego chapter of the National Organization for Women. She was a founder and first president of the Lawyers Club of San Diego, a feminist bar association which successfully advocated for the ratification by California of the Equal Rights Amendment. She was a founder and served as president of the National Association of Women Judges. She served as a member of the Judicial Council Advisory Committee on Gender Bias in the Courts and worked on implementation of the recommendations made.

During Justice McConnell’s judicial career, she has worked to improve the court system through better case management and to make the courts more accessible to the public. In 2005, she was elected by the California Supreme Court to serve on the Commission on Judicial Performance, an independent state agency responsible for judicial discipline, and served as chair from 2009 to 2012. In 2007, the Chief Justice appointed her to the Commission for Impartial Courts, where she served as chair of the Public Information and Education Task Force.

Justice McConnell applies scholarship, and the power and prestige of her position, to open job opportunities for women and minorities. Through her dynamic leadership, she has dramatically changed the landscape of civic learning and civic engagement in California. She chaired the California State Senate Task Force on Family Equity where she was outspoken on the gender bias interactions of daily courtroom life and is remembered for working tirelessly to change laws that unfairly affected women. She also chaired the Leadership Group for Civic Education and currently chairs the Power of Democracy Steering Committee, established to improve civic education in California and to implement the recommendations of the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning, which she co-chaired.

As Administrative Presiding Judge, Justice McConnell has appointed women as the court’s managing attorney and both her permanent staff members are women. In the period 2012-2018, while Justice McConnell has been administrative presiding judge, women attorneys were 62% of the attorneys employed by the California Court of Appeal, District 4 and women employees comprised 72% of District 4’s workforce.

Justice McConnell is the recipient of numerous accolades for her judicial work and efforts to uplift other women. In 2001, Justice McConnell was named Jurist of the Year by the California Judicial Council. In 1999, she was the first recipient of the Benjamin Aranda Access to Justice Award presented jointly by the California Judicial Council, the California Judges Association and the State Bar of California. In 2014, she received the Girl Scouts San Diego Cool Women Award for her work mentoring future women leaders. In 2016, she also received the Chief Justice’s Award for Exemplary Service and Leadership for her work in improving civic learning, and in 2018 she received the California Council for Social Studies Civic Action Award.

Justice McConnell leads by example, and her success in court went beyond her intelligence and wit, as she exerted thoughtfulness and compassion. A deputy public defender recalled: “[McConnell] cared about the kids. She just didn’t want to lock them up and throw away the key. She was concerned about rehabilitation and tried to create alternatives, especially to the California Youth Authority.” A deputy district attorney described Justice McConnell as “very conscientious, hardworking and knowledgeable about the law. But one of the things I like best about her is that she has compassion, empathy for the children, and that is very important. She brought humanity to the bench.”

Throughout her extraordinary career, Justice McConnell has been an inspiration and a mentor, especially to young women. She is a force that challenges bias and rises above the status quo, elevating the people around her. She embodies the kind of person that is highly deserving of the Margaret Brent Award.