

ABA Senior Lawyers Division
Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY
of
PHYLLIS A. KRAVITCH

Interviewer: Anne Emanuel
With assistance from: Laurie Kotz

Dates of Interviews:

July 17, 2013
July 19, 2013
August 7, 2013

**ORAL HISTORY OF
JUDGE PHYLLIS KRAVITCH
ON BEHALF OF
WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW
A PROJECT OF
THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION
SENIOR LAWYERS DIVISION
BY PROFESSOR ANNE EMANUEL
JULY 17, 2013**

Prof. Emanuel: I am Anne Emanuel and I'm with Judge Phyllis Kravitch at her home in Atlanta on July 17, 2013, and we are beginning, this is our first interview in the Trailblazers Oral History series.

Prof. Emanuel: Judge, as you moved through school, when did you decide that you were interested in going to law school?

Judge Kravitch: Early on I fell in love with ballet and I thought I was going to be a great ballerina. I think it was probably by the time I was a teenager that I decided, started thinking about law school, although back then there were no women lawyers and certainly no women on the bench or anything as we have here today. I remember one incident when I was about 12. My father was one of the only lawyers in Savannah, he was a trial lawyer and if the court appointed him to represent an indigent, he would take the case. And he was appointed to represent an indigent African-American man in a highly-publicized and very unpopular case. And as a result, I was the only little girl in my scout troop that was not invited to another child's birthday party, which upset me terribly. And my

father's way of dealing with my disappointment was to explain the Constitution and the Sixth Amendment and I remember that he said, "When you are a little older, you'll understand there are more important things in life than birthday parties." I didn't know what he meant at the time but as time went by, I remembered that and became more interested in a legal career.

Prof. Emanuel: But as you mentioned, not only very few but virtually no women were lawyers at the time and I suspect certainly none in Savannah, Georgia.

Judge Kravitch: There was one woman who had passed the Bar when my father had and then gone to Washington to practice up there. And the few women who did pass the Bar and practice were more or less like paralegals. They didn't go into court.

Prof. Emanuel: When you did decide to go to law school, did your father support you?

Judge Kravitch: Oh absolutely, he was very encouraging.

Prof. Emanuel: And your mother.

Judge Kravitch: She went along.

Prof. Emanuel: You know we've skipped right by college. Obviously you went to college before you went to law school.

Judge Kravitch: I went to college in Baltimore, and I remember the Dean talking to me about medical school because Johns Hopkins had a scholarship I think for women students, but I wasn't interested in medicine.

Prof. Emanuel: So I take it you had a very strong academic record in college. The Dean was asking you about a scholarship to medical school.

Judge Kravitch: Right.

Prof. Emanuel: And that was at Goucher.

Judge Kravitch: Yes. And then I looked at law schools to see which ones admitted women. And I remember my father saying, apply at the University of Pennsylvania because he said when he went to law school in 1914, there was a woman in his class.

Prof. Emanuel: Did you apply to any other law school or just University of Pennsylvania?

Judge Kravitch: I wanted to apply to Harvard but Harvard did not take women at that time. And some law schools that did accept women, I was told women were never called on. You more or less audited. And I have to say at the University of Pennsylvania, I was treated like everybody else in the class. And I remember the first day walking into that huge entrance hall and there were all men. We had assigned seats. And I went into the lecture hall because there were 160 in my class and there was one other woman and a very friendly young man sitting across from me introduced himself, said, "Good morning, my name is Arlin Adams and I'm from Philadelphia." And I said, "I'm Phyllis Kravitch and I'm from," and he said, "Georgia? South Carolina?" And I said, "Georgia." And we ended up studying together and he ended on the Third Circuit Court of Appeals.

Prof. Emanuel: Amazing. And the other woman in the class, did they seat you near her or did they put you in the same sections.

Judge Kravitch: I think it was done alphabetically. I know she sat on the other side of the room and she had a lot of friends in Philadelphia.

Prof. Emanuel: Now you said you were treated like every other student, was that true of every professor at Penn?

Judge Kravitch: Most of them. There were two instances in which I was treated differently. There was one professor, and only one, who I was told ahead of time never called

on a woman. And one time, after two or three men that were called on didn't give the right answer, he said, "Is anyone else prepared to recite?" And I raised my hand and I said, "Professor Chadwick, I would like to." And he said, "Because no one is prepared, I'll discuss the case myself."

Prof. Emanuel: My goodness.

Judge Kravitch: Now that wouldn't happen today. Another professor, Professor Philbrick, who was just a dear little gentleman, right out of Dickens, taught us property law, and one time, after two or three students had given the wrong answer, he looked over to me and said, "Miss Kravitch, how would you analyze this case?" And I told him. He said, "Exactly, exactly." And then he turned from side to side and said, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, aren't you ashamed?" But for those two instances, I was treated like anyone else in class.

Prof. Emanuel: And you did very well in your class too.

Judge Kravitch: I think so because under the then-system, at the end of the first year, the top 10 percent were invited to try out for Law Review, and I was in that 10 percent.

Prof. Emanuel: So you served on the Law Review.

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And that was quite a distinction, University of Pennsylvania Law Review.

Judge Kravitch: And I ended up as one of the Board of Editors.

Prof. Emanuel: And an editor as well. And then when you got close to graduation and began looking for a job?

Judge Kravitch: There were no jobs, not for women.

Prof. Emanuel: Did anyone interview you?

Judge Kravitch: No, even though by that time, the war had started. My first year in law school came Pearl Harbor. And I remember the next day going to school and there was a notice that we were not going to have class, everyone would assemble in the main assembly hall so we could listen to the President's speech.

Prof. Emanuel: So you started law school in the fall of 1940, is that correct.

Judge Kravitch: In the fall of 41.

Prof. Emanuel: In the fall of 41. Oh, because Pearl Harbor was December.

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And then did many of your male classmates leave after that or not return for the second year of law school?

Judge Kravitch: Gradually, they would start leaving. What the school decided to do, and they announced this the next day after Pearl Harbor or two days later, that because they wanted as many to be deferred if possible in the beginning, because it took a while before the draft was fully in place, that they would cancel all formal vacations and we would go through the summer so that those who were in the third year would graduate in May anyway. And then instead of having a summer vacation, the next semester would start after a week's vacation. They did announce that the few women in the law school would not have to abide by that schedule, but since all my friends were, I decided I would do it too. So I went through law school in two years. And then came the looking for a job.

Prof. Emanuel: And what was the process? Did the law firms come to the campus to interview, invite you to the offices?

Judge Kravitch: I'm not sure. Being a woman, I wouldn't have been invited to meet with anyone. The Dean suggested that I apply for a clerkship and I did.

Prof. Emanuel: And which court did he suggest?

Judge Kravitch: To the Third Circuit, which is up in Pennsylvania. And I applied, but no one interviewed me. Owen J. Roberts, who was on the Supreme Court, was a friend of the Dean and had previously taught at Penn. In fact he taught my father. And after no law firm would interview me, the Dean suggested that I apply for a clerkship. I had one interview on the Supreme Court, but I was told that preference would be given to a male student because there never had been a female clerk.

Prof. Emanuel: Was that Justice Roberts?

Judge Kravitch: No that was Justice Murphy. But after the interview he told me it was his birthday, and his secretary had brought him a cake. The other justices were all coming in to share and would I do him the honor of staying and slicing the cake. So I did not get the clerkship but I played hostess.

Prof. Emanuel: And, Judge, you mentioned the Third Circuit. Did you get any interviews on the Third Circuit?

Judge Kravitch: No, but I interviewed with one District judge who told me he had absolutely no objection to a female clerk and that if he could not find a qualified male, he would offer me the job. And he found a qualified male. I knew he would.

Prof. Emanuel: It would seem like that.

Judge Kravitch: So finally my father said if you want to practice law, you can always come back

home. So.

Prof. Emanuel: I thought the Dean tried to assist you with private practice opportunities too.

Judge Kravitch: He did suggest that I apply to one law firm where he was friendly with one of the partners who said they might consider a woman, but he called me the next week and said he got a phone call from the partner who wanted to know what religion I was because they would not accept anyone who was Jewish.

Prof. Emanuel: So they would have hired a woman.

Judge Kravitch: They would have considered hiring a woman.

Prof. Emanuel: So at that point, your father stepped in?

Judge Kravitch: Well, my father just said if you want to practice law, you can always come back home.

Prof. Emanuel: Did he have a solo practice?

Judge Kravitch: There were two or three younger lawyers in the office. It was mainly his practice, but he always had a few young associates. So I went back to Savannah.

Prof. Emanuel: And his practice was?

Judge Kravitch: It was a general practice and he was one of the few lawyers in Savannah who would represent a Black person. Especially if he was appointed in a criminal case. Appointed counsel back then was not compensated at all. You weren't even paid your out-of-pocket expenses. And that's why most lawyers didn't want to accept cases that the court appointed. My father felt it was your obligation as a member of the Bar to represent someone if the court asked you and there was no conflict. And I found an article just last week, a newspaper

clipping, in which the judge in the Superior Court commended him for never refusing to take any case that the court asked him to.

Prof. Emanuel: And you found that article where Judge?

Judge Kravitch: It was in some of my papers in the office.

Prof. Emanuel: Wonderful. Well he must have had a fair number of those cases because he was one of the few people that would take them.

Judge Kravitch: Well he did. And back then, judges from adjoining counties would call and ask him to take a case because they couldn't find counsel at the local Bar.

Prof. Emanuel: I believed he maintained a civil practice as well as the criminal practice.

Judge Kravitch: It was.

Prof. Emanuel: So you came back and were a new lawyer in the office. Were you the only woman attorney practicing in Chatham County?

Judge Kravitch: There might have been one or two others, but they didn't go to court. They were more like paralegals.

Prof. Emanuel: So you didn't have a female colleague in those early years.

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: But you did go to court with your father.

Judge Kravitch: Oh yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And what were your early experiences in court? I think we're talking 1943-44.

Judge Kravitch: I started practicing about 1944. Usually I was the only woman in the courtroom. And there were no women on juries. They were all male.

Prof. Emanuel: So there were no other women in the courtroom unless someone was there in the

spectator section.

Judge Kravitch: Right.

Prof. Emanuel: Even the court reporters were not female at the time.

Judge Kravitch: No the court reporters were all male. And the clerk of the court was always a male.

Prof. Emanuel: And I believe it caused a little stir when your father first took you to court.

Judge Kravitch: That's right.

Prof. Emanuel: Could you tell us about that.

Judge Kravitch: Well, I went to court with him and sat at the counsel table and made notes. And the next day the presiding judge called my father and told him that every lawyer who was in that courtroom, or who passed by and looked in and saw me sitting there called the judge afterwards to complain about my presence, that a courtroom is no place for a woman. And the judge agreed with them. He told my father to find work for me to do in the office. And all my dad said was, "Your Honor, she passed the Bar, she's been admitted to practice and if the men don't like it, that's just too bad, they'll just have to get used to it."

Prof. Emanuel: Now did your father tell you about that when it happened?

Judge Kravitch: No, not until later.

Prof. Emanuel: It would have been very intimidating.

Judge Kravitch: I probably would have given it up, gone into something else.

Prof. Emanuel: But he sent you into court very quickly, very soon. I think he sent you into handle a case.

Judge Kravitch: Yes. I remember the case because, as he explained to me ahead of time, it was a no lose proposition. It was a case that had been settled. It was an African-American school teacher whose car had been hit driving home from school. The person who ran the red light admitted it was his fault and his insurance company offered to pay the damages. There was minimal damage to the car considering he hit it broadside which the insurance company paid for, but her 12-year old son was in the car with her, and there were no seatbelts then. And he'd been jostled on the front seat and hit his arm and required going to the doctor and having an x-ray taken. Because there was a minor involved, the agreement had to be approved by the court. The judge put the case down on the motions day calendar. Being a newly-admitted lawyer, I wrote out every question beginning with, "Would you please state your name," and by the time I got to the third question, the room had gotten very quiet, and the judge is frowning and I thought I had left out something very important. And I couldn't see what. I finally finished, and the judge then said court will be in recess for ten minutes. And I gathered up my papers and as I left the courtroom, the bailiff said, "Phyllis the judge wants to see you in chambers right away." So I went into his office. I said, "Your Honor, do you want to see me?" And he said, "Yes. I told your father last week to keep you in the office because lawyers don't want you in the courtroom, but if you insist on coming in, on your very first case, did you have to offend everybody in that room. I don't understand you at all." And I said, "Your Honor, I don't understand, what did I do." And he said, "What did you do? You called that n- woman Mrs. The custom here is to address Black people by their

first name.” And I thought, I’m back in the South.

Prof. Emanuel: And this was the presiding judge again.

Judge Kravitch: This was the presiding judge.

Prof. Emanuel: And it was a direction. So you spoke to your father about that too I assume.

Judge Kravitch: The judge said, “Your father does it and he gets away with it because most of the lawyers are afraid of him, but it’s not going to be easy for you.”

Prof. Emanuel: My goodness. What did he mean when he said most of the lawyers are afraid of your father.

Judge Kravitch: He used to win all of his cases.

Prof. Emanuel: He was an excellent trial lawyer I take it.

Judge Kravitch: He was probably the best trial lawyer in south Georgia.

Prof. Emanuel: He didn’t have the gender issues that you had, but he was a Jewish man.

Judge Kravitch: And he also was willing to represent a Black person. He had an integrated waiting room. And even when I started practicing, I can remember from time to time someone who had made an appointment would arrive, walk into the waiting room, see a Black person sitting there, and just say cancel my appointment.

Prof. Emanuel: Because his Black and White clients used the same waiting room.

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: To get back to that courtroom story.

Judge Kravitch: Clarence Thomas will let you know that my father represented his grandfather at one time.

Prof. Emanuel: Do you know what the matter was?

Judge Kravitch: Probably a lease or something like that. Because his grandfather had a small business.

Prof. Emanuel: And he would have needed commercial help. Were there Black lawyers practicing then?

Judge Kravitch: A few. There was one Black lawyer who started practicing the same time I did, and he was not allowed to use the law library in the courthouse. He used to come and use my father's library.

Prof. Emanuel: Would other lawyers let him use their library?

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: Was that your father's custom with the Black lawyers in Chatham County?

Judge Kravitch: There was only one or two. There was one practicing.

Prof. Emanuel: That was Mr. Gadsden?

Judge Kravitch: This was before Mr. Gadsden. When I was little, growing up, there was a lawyer by the name of Lemon, J.P. Lemon I think. And I remember one day, I was in about the second grade in school, and Mr. Lemon had called my father to see if he was going to be back in the office. He wanted to talk to him about a case and my dad said no, it was too hot but why didn't he come by the house. And a few minutes later, he drove up. I was playing with a classmate in one of the other rooms. And my father went to the back of the house and asked the maid to bring some iced tea in for him and Mr. Lemon. And Monday morning the little girl went to school, her name was Isabelle, and told everybody in the class that she would never again go to Phyllis's house to play because she was there Saturday and this Black man came to the house, to the front door, not the back door, and

Phyllis's father let him and a few minutes later, here came the maid from the kitchen with a silver tray and two glasses of iced tea and served him as if he was real company, and when she went home and told her mother, her mother said she could never again go over there to play.

Prof. Emanuel: Did any other children follow suit and not come to your house because of that?

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: But then when you became a member of the Bar and joined your father's practice, were you a member of the local Bar association, did you attend the kinds of functions that young lawyers usually went to?

Judge Kravitch: I usually went to the meetings. I might not have had much company, but I attended the Bar meetings.

Prof. Emanuel: I assume there was a Savannah Bar Association.

Judge Kravitch: There was, and later on I became the first woman President of it.

Prof. Emanuel: And how did that come about, Judge?

Judge Kravitch: I'd been practicing probably 20 years. And the Savannah Bar had gotten an award for having had the best programs during the year at one of the state bar meetings, which pleased everybody. I had been chair of the committee that had done the programs. And one of the lawyers stopped me in the hall to congratulate me because the Savannah Bar had gotten this award. And he said you've never been an officer of the Bar and I'm on the nominating committee. And we're meeting next week and I'm going to nominate you to be secretary. And I said I wouldn't accept it. There's nothing wrong with being secretary, but under the custom of the Savannah Bar, someone right out of law school is usually

secretary. Not somebody that's been practicing 20 years or more. And that would be equating a woman with 20 years practice with a man right of law school. I said, there are several young women who have just been admitted to practice, elect one of them secretary. He called me a few days later and said "I told them what you said. They'd like to make you president."

Prof. Emanuel: And you were nominated for President. Was anyone nominated to run against you?

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: So you served as President of the Savannah Bar.

Judge Kravitch: And I was determined that was going to be the best year of the Savannah Bar. So I picked up the phone and called the incoming President of the American Bar Association, not knowing that his calendar is made up a year ahead a time. And invited him to come to our first meeting a couple of months away.

Prof. Emanuel: So this is 1973 and you called the incoming President of the ABA, Chesterfield Smith.

Judge Kravitch: I called and told the secretary who I was and she wanted to know what I wanted to talk to him about, and I explained I was the incoming President of the Savannah Bar. We wanted to invite him to come and speak at our first opening year luncheon. And she said, "Well Mr. Smith's schedule is made up a year ahead of time. And about that time, this booming voice said, "Where is this call coming from?" And he grabbed the phone, and he said, "This is Chesterfield Smith. I'm sorry but I won't be able to come but please explain to the Savannah Bar that my schedule's already a year ahead of time and what did you say your

President's name was so I can write to him and explain?" And I said, "I'm the incoming President." And he said, "Savannah, Georgia's elected a woman? What day did you want me to come?"

Prof. Emanuel: Oh my goodness.

Judge Kravitch: He said, "I'll try to see if I can try to arrange it." A few minutes he called me back and said, "I have to be in Detroit or some place in time for a dinner meeting. But this is the time my plane would leave Savannah; if you could arrange your meeting so that I can get to the airport in time, I'll come."

Prof. Emanuel: And I take it you arranged it.

Judge Kravitch: I arranged it. And he came, so we started the year with much publicity and a larger attendance than we'd ever had.

Prof. Emanuel: That was quite a coup. And he recognized the significance instantly of you being elected.

Judge Kravitch: Yep. It was about that time that things began changing radically.

Prof. Emanuel: In the 70s for women. It's not very long after that when you went on the bench.

Judge Kravitch: It was the next year. In Georgia, judges technically are elected. Usually they were appointed because no one would run against an incumbent judge, and if someone died mid-term, and the governor appointed a successor, then that judge would from then on run unopposed. And for the first time since I had been practicing, there was going to be a vacancy because one of the incumbent Superior Court judges, there were three in Savannah in Chatham County, announced he was going to serve out his term but then he was going to retire and he was not going to run for re-election. And the next day in court rumors were

flying around as to which lawyers were interested in running for the job. And they all said they couldn't afford to run. They had children in college and they could not take a decrease in earnings. And then one of them looked at me and said, "You know Phyllis, if you were not a woman, you'd be the perfect candidate. You've got name recognition. You're in court all the time. You don't have three children to send through college." And again he repeated, "If you were not a woman, you'd be the perfect candidate." And I called him the next day and said, "You all talked me into it."

Prof. Emanuel: So you ran for that seat. Were you opposed in the election?.

Judge Kravitch: Oh yes, there were two lower-court judges that announced. One was a juvenile court judge and one was a state court judge.

Prof. Emanuel: So they had name recognition too.

Judge Kravitch: Oh yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And they were both men.

Judge Kravitch: They were both men. And there was much making fun of a woman being on the bench such as "she would put pink lace curtains in the windows."

Prof. Emanuel: You mean in legal circles or in the press?

Judge Kravitch: Both. I announced that I was not going to take any contributions over \$100 and no contributions from any lawyers.

Prof. Emanuel: Now that was quite unusual I would assume.

Judge Kravitch: Very. I found out only lawyers contributed to judicial races. But I'm very much opposed to elected judges for that reason.

Prof. Emanuel: So you ran your campaign without contributions from lawyers.

Judge Kravitch: It was a very low-key race. I think I met everybody in Chatham County. Former clients would call and say what can I do to help you. And I would say invite some of your neighbors over for about an hour and don't serve anything except Cokes or lemonade and I'll come and answer questions about the court.

Prof. Emanuel: And by then you had a substantial number of former clients.

Judge Kravitch: Oh a lot.

Prof. Emanuel: And you had represented them in all kinds of matters. Did you handle criminal cases too?

Judge Kravitch: I had handled some criminal cases, but not a lot. But I had several murder cases representing women who had killed their husbands.

Prof. Emanuel: Did you have any acquittals in that group?

Judge Kravitch: They were all acquitted.

Prof. Emanuel: My goodness.

Judge Kravitch: I had at least a half of dozen.

Prof. Emanuel: Not an easy case to win ordinarily.

Judge Kravitch: But these were women whose husbands had abused them.

Prof. Emanuel: And in civil cases, you also handled civil litigation and I think in those years too you were handling civil rights litigation.

Judge Kravitch: Some yes. There was one case that provoked a lot of controversy and was very unpopular, and that was for African-Americans to be allowed to vote in the Democratic primary.

Prof. Emanuel:

And this was the 60s? The 70s?

Judge Kravitch:

This was probably in the 60s.

Prof. Emanuel:

And African-Americans weren't allowed to vote in the Democratic primary.

Judge Kravitch:

No. And there was no Republican, except every four years somebody running for President. But the Governor, the state legislators, all of those people were chosen in the Democratic primaries and that candidate would run unopposed in the general election.

Prof. Emanuel:

And African-Americans weren't allowed to participate in the primaries. Who were the clients that you represented in that litigation?

Judge Kravitch:

Prominent Black citizens.

Prof. Emanuel:

Was your father involved in that too?

Judge Kravitch:

Oh yes.

Prof. Emanuel:

So Judge we were talking about your successful run for Chatham County Superior Court in the early 1970s.

Judge Kravitch:

No woman in the state of Georgia had ever been on a court that high. There had been women probate judges on the municipal court, but not a court of general jurisdiction.

Prof. Emanuel:

So you were the first female Superior Court judge in the entire state of Georgia?

Judge Kravitch:

Yes.

Prof. Emanuel:

And that was in Chatham County, which happens to be one of the more southern-most counties in Georgia. So winning that election must have been a daunting prospect.

Judge Kravitch: Well, it attracted a lot of publicity. There was a huge article in the Atlanta newspaper. Mainly because I was the first woman in the state. And shortly thereafter it opened the door to judgeships through the Governor appointing women to the court.

Prof. Emanuel: It must have been controversial among the electorate in Chatham County at the time. What was your base of voters that allowed you to win that election? Do you have an idea?

Judge Kravitch: Yes. Former clients, we represented a lot of people, working-class people, women, women's groups, especially since my opponents made fun of the idea of a woman being on the bench. And I even had young women in high school calling and saying I can't vote yet because I'm only 17 but what can I do to help. And senior citizens. And I had been on the Board of Education several years earlier and had worked very hard to equalize pay between Black and White and male and female, and all of these former schoolteachers came out or called and said what can we do to help.

Prof. Emanuel: So among the school teacher groups you were equalizing on racial grounds and also gender. But did you feel like you had general support among school teachers, not just the women and the Black teachers?

Judge Kravitch: I think I had support among all the teachers, and I must have gotten almost 100% of the Black vote.

Prof. Emanuel: Because you and your father had represented Black people in some significant voting rights litigation as well as all the criminal cases.

Judge Kravitch: Exactly.

Prof. Emanuel: And what women's groups were there?

Judge Kravitch: The Junior League.

Prof. Emanuel: So Judge, when you say that the women's groups supported you, do you mean official endorsements by the groups.

Judge Kravitch: No, most of these groups don't get involved in politics, but I had most of the members. And they were calling. They would like to help.

Prof. Emanuel: So you had a strong grass roots campaign.

Judge Kravitch: Very. By the end of the campaign I knew everybody in Chatham County.

Prof. Emanuel: And how did the local press group respond to this?

Judge Kravitch: They mainly stayed fairly neutral.

Prof. Emanuel: In other words, they just tried to report the coverage on the campaign.

Judge Kravitch: Right. And the campaign got rather ugly. Under Georgia law, you have to have 50 percent of the vote, otherwise there's a runoff. I came in first, but I didn't get 50 percent, so then there had to be a runoff between me and the man who came in second. During the first campaign, the two male candidates were throwing mud at each other because I don't think they thought I had a chance. And then it turned out, I came in first. Then I had to have runoff with the one who came in second. And then he got on television and started saying things like, "when the right-thinking White people look at the polls and they see that most of the Black neighborhoods voted for Ms. Kravitch, they are going to the polls because they're not going let a bunch of Blacks decide who is going to be the judge." And all that hurt him. At one forum at a Savannah church, he got up and said

only a Christian could be a judge.

Prof. Emanuel: And were you very confident going into the elections?

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: Was your father confident on your behalf.

Judge Kravitch: Oh, he had already died.

Prof. Emanuel: Oh I didn't realize that. But that was a very brave thing to do at that point in time.

Judge Kravitch: I ran and went on the bench, I believe five or six years after he died. [Aaron Kravitch died in April 1971. Judge Kravitch was elected as a superior court judge in 1977.]

Prof. Emanuel: But he would certainly have liked to see you on the bench. And your mother was still alive at that time?

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: But you took it on despite your lack of confidence that you could win.

Judge Kravitch: When I announced I think I thought I had a chance to win. I had been told that my name had been up before a commission when there was a vacancy on the state court bench about six or seven years earlier, and that the then-Governor had said, "Georgia's not ready for that yet." So I thought, we'll see.

Prof. Emanuel: And would that have been a state-wide commission, or a Savannah commission.

Judge Kravitch: State wide.

Prof. Emanuel: And the two men that ran against you, I assume you knew them.

Judge Kravitch: One was a state court judge and one was a juvenile court judge.

Prof. Emanuel: So you did know both of them. The Bar wouldn't have formally supported anyone, but did you feel like you had support from other lawyers?

Judge Kravitch: Most of the Bar supported the state court judge.

Prof. Emanuel: And he came in second.

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And did the juvenile court judge endorse anyone after he was eliminated.

Judge Kravitch: No, except he let it be known that he would support me.

Prof. Emanuel: He did. That's an interesting development in itself.

Judge Kravitch: Well the other one had been so nasty during the first campaign when it was three of us running.

Prof. Emanuel: Did the local press think you were a viable candidate?

Judge Kravitch: I think so.

Prof. Emanuel: So what was it like to be the first woman superior court judge in the entire state of Georgia?

Judge Kravitch: Interesting. The two local superior court judges were friendly with the state court judge. So they were not very helpful.

Prof. Emanuel: How were received at the state-wide meetings of Superior Court judges?

Judge Kravitch: They were very kind and very helpful.

Prof. Emanuel: Across the state. Did anyone step up and offer you assistance as a new judge?

Judge Kravitch: Oh yes, one judge from Athens. In fact his son is in Congress now:
John Barrow

Prof. Emanuel: Did you know him before you went on the bench?

Judge Kravitch: No. Also Judge Harrison was very helpful. He was the judge that I would succeed.

Prof. Emanuel: And he was helpful to you?

Judge Kravitch: Very, very.

Prof. Emanuel: And you had appeared before him many times.

Judge Kravitch: Oh yes. In fact when he was asked which of the three candidates is best qualified to go on the bench, his answer was, "There is only one that is qualified and that's Kravitch."

Prof. Emanuel: That was an endorsement.

Judge Kravitch: Oh yes a good one.

Prof. Emanuel: By the time you went on the bench about how many women were practicing?

Judge Kravitch: Probably about 20.

Prof. Emanuel: And I assume you had their support.

Judge Kravitch: Most of them

Prof. Emanuel: But not all?

Judge Kravitch: No, because most of them had gone into firms that were not supporting me.

Prof. Emanuel: Savannah had significant law firms at the time?

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And the firms as a whole supported other candidates?

Judge Kravitch: The firms as a whole mostly supported Jim Head.

Judge Kravitch: He was a state court judge.

Prof. Emanuel: And they continued to support him even after he began the campaign based on race?

Judge Kravitch: Because they thought he was going to get elected.

Judge Kravitch: As one lawyer was quoted as saying, "You have to decide whether you practice in juvenile court or state court."

Judge Kravitch: "If you support Grady, you won't be able to go into state court, and if you support Jim Head, you won't be able to able to ever go into juvenile court if you had a case there. But if you don't support Phyllis, and she gets elected, will she be fair?" He then answered the question himself, "Oh, absolutely."

Prof. Emanuel: Now by that time were there many other professional women in the courthouse?

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: Not even court reporters? The secretaries I assume were female.

Judge Kravitch: The secretaries were all female, but most of the other office holders were not. You were entitled to a bailiff, which I didn't want, and a secretary. I needed a secretary. They had a civil service arrangement where they'd advertise the open position and then send you the top three applicants. When they had the top three, I said, "Let's start with Number 1, what was her score, what's her background, what's her education?" They didn't have computers in those days, and the woman who was number 1 was so much better qualified than the next two. I said, "I'd just like to interview No. 1." The woman said to me, "You don't have to take number 1, you can take number 2 or 3." She kept repeating this. I said, "You've told me that twice, I'm only interested in the one with the top score." She was a college graduate, and had a very important job in New York before she

married and moved to Savannah. The woman said, "Miss. Kravitch, she's Black." I said, "So." "You'd hire a Black secretary," she asked. I said, "If she's the best qualified." She was by far the best qualified. The lady in charge sent all three to my office when I said I would just like to interview number 1.

Prof. Emanuel: So you hired No. 1 and how long did she stay with you?.

Judge Kravitch: As long as I stayed at the courthouse. And it almost blew the roof off of the Chatham County Courthouse. She was the first Black person to have a job other than the cleaning crew in the Chatham County Courthouse.

Prof. Emanuel: And this was in the 1970s. My goodness. And when you left did she continue with anyone?

Judge Kravitch: She's now secretary to the Magistrate Judge.

Prof. Emanuel: Decades later. So Judge, you were confronting all kinds of bias, not only gender, but religious and racial bias, all of it quite head on.

Judge Kravitch: Yes.

Prof. Emanuel: And partly that came from your father's tutelage?

Judge Kravitch: I think so.

Prof. Emanuel: As a Judge in Chatham County, did you feel you received the same deference from the Bar that male judges did?

Judge Kravitch: No.

Prof. Emanuel: Were there specific things that happened that made it discernible or was it more attitude?

Judge Kravitch: It was attitude. They'd walk in the outside office to the secretary's desk and

hand her the documents and say, “take them in to her.”

Prof. Emanuel: And they would refer to you as “her” and not “judge”?

Judge Kravitch: When my nephew was about 14, he came home from summer camp and had a week in Savannah before they were going back to New York, and with nothing to do, so I’d told him I’d give him a job. He could come down to the office with me every morning and put the books back on the shelves, help carry things downstairs to the Clerk’s office and run errands. So he felt very important. One night after he came home, he said, “The lawyers who are coming into this office, they don’t have very good manners. They never say please or thank you or thank you.” I said, “Andy, just because they went to law school doesn’t mean they have good manners.”

Prof. Emanuel: Was that because your secretary was a Black woman? Or did they treat you rudely as well?

Judge Kravitch: The other two judges never invited me to go to lunch or anything else the entire time I was on the Superior Court.