ABA Commission on Women in the Profession

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

MIRIAM WOLFF

Interviewer: LaDoris Cordell

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Ms. Cordell: We’re going to start today with your changing careers. With your becoming a judge. And we talked a bit last time about how it all came about. Phone calls being made and all of a sudden you’re a judge. So if you could take us to, I guess we’re talking about 1975. And I’m not sure what time of year this was, but could you take us to the beginning. I’m not sure; I’m don’t remember, if you talked about …. I think you did talk about being sworn in. It was a private ceremony. May be you’d kind of want to go back over that a little bit. So, you’re now a judge. And can you just remember the first thing you did? You got a phone call, then its official. You had to wait a little bit before it became official. What did you do?

Judge Wolff: I tell all young women looking for judgeship and men too, that my theory is that nobody, no one person can make you a judge. But that one person can probably keep you from being a judge. And I thought I don’t know the county. I thought I don’t know the party people in Santa Clara County. And I don’t expect any of them to make me a judge. But I think its very important that they know who I am and that I know who they are and that we touch base.

Ms. Cordell: And your connections were primarily in San Francisco, right?

Judge Wolff: My connections were really in San Francisco.

Ms. Cordell: In Washington and San Francisco but not locally down here.
Judge Wolff: Not here at all. Very little, I did of course know some of the Stanford people who were practicing law down here but there weren’t very many at that time. They tended to be kind of individual offices, except for maybe one or two well known names who did happen to have Stanford connections. I did know most of the people with Stanford connections because the law school was pretty homogenous and we tended to know one another. Also I had served as president of the board of visitors and so I had gotten pretty well acquainted with the bar association here. But certainly not acquainted with the people in political office nor with other judges, for the most part. I thought that was important that they at least know who I was. And again many of those I did know socially and certainly those connected with Stanford I knew.

Ms. Cordell: Before you got the phone call from the friends suggesting you become a judge, had you given any thought to actually going on a bench?

Judge Wolff: For a very short period of time and that had been before I had moved to the port. And nothing came of that because I really didn’t pay any attention.

Then I called various lawyers I knew, asked them their opinion, and I recommend to all people who want to be a judge that you make it known to people generally that you’re interested in being considered. Also it gives you something to do which is important. So I began getting reports back and calls from large firms in San Francisco asking whether I was interested and was there anything they could do to help. You know, I had a standard answer. If you know the governor, go right ahead.

Ms. Cordell: And the governor at the time was?
Judge Wolff: Reagan. I knew him slightly, but not that well. And I did like him very much. You know most people remember him at the end of his presidency, but I remember him at the beginning of his governorship. I regarded him as a very bright, able man. So it was kind of a win-win situation. Anyhow, I then got word that I would be appointed. I was asked … there were two slots open. One was the one that I took … well, I guess, there were more slots open than that, but two were available and one was the one I took. Judge Fernandez was being elevated. And the other was a brand new opening. It was on the then superior court and the question was whether or not it was going to be a valid appointment for Governor Reagan or whether it was going to go to the next governor. The attorney general was of a divided opinion on whether it was going to be a valid appointment and that’s the one that Marilyn Zecker got. I was asked if in light of my age did I want that one, and I talked to the people in the attorney general’s office who said well they really didn’t think Governor Reagan had the appointment power and I didn’t really want to go through that. So.

Ms. Cordell: So, just to clarify today in California we only have the superior courts as far as trial courts. But in 1975 and really many, many years before and after there were two trial court levels: there was the municipal court and the superior court. And the municipal courts, pretty much the requirement was you had to have at least five years experience practicing law and in superior court you had to have a minimum of ten years. So municipal was seen also back then as an entry way really into the judgeship. But apparently you had a choice. You
could have been on a superior court, but then it was iffy as to whether or not Governor Reagan could really make a valid appointment. So you opted clearly for the sure thing knowing he could appoint you to the municipal court without it being contested.

Judge Wolff: And I had no feeling about that. I thought the municipal court was a fine appointment and that indeed it frankly did not bother me. I liked the court and I liked the work of the court. But it did turn out that we spent a lot of time on preliminary criminal hearings. We could do everything including taking a plea. The actual sentencing had to be a superior court judge and frankly that didn’t bother me.

Ms. Cordell: But I’m curious about the hierarchy and prestige because when I came along, the very court you presided on, I think I came along seven years after your appointment, there was always a sense of hierarchy that it was more prestigious to be in the superior court. They made more money. But there was this thing and I’m just curious: did that play any factor at all? You could have chosen superior court which was more prestigious. I mean its just the feeling among the judges…

Judge Wolff: That’s right. And among, probably, among everybody.

Ms. Cordell: Right.

Judge Wolff: It did not bother me. I can’t explain exactly why. I would certainly have looked to forward getting a superior court appointment. Fortunately the courts were later merged. But if they had not been I would certainly have looked toward getting a superior court appointment.
Ms. Cordell: So when you started in 1975 you were about 62 or 63. Does that sound right.

Judge Wolff: I was 59 when I took office.

Ms. Cordell: And at this time were your parents still living?

Judge Wolff: No.

Ms. Cordell: So, both parents …

Judge Wolff: My father had died long before any of this and my mother died during my last year as port director.

Ms. Cordell: So you and your brother….

Judge Wolff: Leaving my brother who lived in Southern California.

Ms. Cordell: So you started … you don’t remember what time of year it was when you started on the bench?

Judge Wolff: January.

Ms. Cordell: You started in January. Did they give you any training before that or what did you… get a robe and go to work?

Judge Wolff: Basically, yes. Mark Thomas and I started the same day. We went into the court and sat on the bench with Judge Wright. One of my very favorite judges. The three of us sat and listened to a case that involved shoplifting.

Ms. Cordell: So you were sitting kind of in the back watching?

Judge Wolff: No, the three of us sat as if we were a three judge federal court.

Ms. Cordell: And, this was a trial court?

Judge Wolff: It was a trial court.

Ms. Cordell: And you sat together. Okay.
Judge Wolff: Yes, but it was one presiding judge and he more or less tutored us as he went along as to what he was doing. And we both, Mark and I had had a lot of court experience, not perhaps in municipal court, but a lot of court experience, so court didn’t come as a big shock.

Ms. Cordell: So that was your training, kind of sitting in?

Judge Wolff: And that was our training. And then we both went to judges college.

Ms. Cordell: But that didn’t come in a while, right.

Judge Wolff: That didn’t come for quite a few months. It was the next summer.

Ms. Cordell: Right.

Judge Wolff: And,

Ms. Cordell: The judges college is usually in July and if you started in January you had a good six months to just kind of … was it on the job training kind of thing?

Judge Wolff: That’s right.

Ms. Cordell: So can you remember your first day? First day on the bench. Do you know what that felt like?

Judge Wolff: No. I do know this, of course any judge would appreciate it. Probably the pace is worse in the municipal court because you get … your clerk gives you a stack of files and you’re calling or your clerk or somebody is calling those cases as fast as possible. You’re reading the file. You’re looking at, if it was something charging a person with a misdemeanor or any offense, I personally preferred to read it aloud because it gave me my chance to read it. My clerk was a woman named Nancy Atkins who was very good and very thorough and I never managed to beat her to court and I always got to court at least an hour
early to go through the files. They were always on my desk with little notes about what was involved. Nothing that I could not have read to the defendant himself. No personal information. But just what the docket was. You spend a good part of your morning going through a voluminous docket and either taking pleas, doing sentencing, doing whatever is required. It’s a very high volume busy court. In addition we were in Sunnyvale, and Sunnyvale was regarded as a very good court. It had been a very good court before. People liked coming … by saying people I mean the public defenders office and the district attorney’s office liked coming to Sunnyvale.

Ms. Cordell: And just for explanation for those not familiar with the area, Santa Clara County and the North, Palo Alto, in the very south you’ve got Morgan Hill, Gilroy and San Jose, and in between there are various cities. One of which is Sunnyvale which is the next south from Palo Alto. And Santa Clara County has courtrooms, courthouses in various cities throughout the county. So Sunnyvale is one the you’re talking about now.

Judge Wolff: Yes. And it was a very well run courthouse. It’d been a good courthouse and it was well located. Comfortable chambers.

Ms. Cordell: Judge O’Grady was there and …

Judge Wolff: O’Grady was then in Palo Alto. He came much later. We had adequate courtrooms. We actually had three courtrooms. Three really functioning courtrooms, but there were only two judges regularly. We ran a very efficient court. We had good clerks who liked working for the judges. One of the first requests I had from the chief clerk was, she came in and said, the women want
to know whether you would permit them to wear trousers to court, and I told them I was sure you would not. And I said oh yes I would. And she said, “well!” She said I assume it has to be something like a pantsuit and I said yes that would be fine. Because actually here were women … I had for a while an all female court.

Ms. Cordell: Meaning, courtroom, court reporter …

Judge Wolff: Court reporter.

Ms. Cordell: Bailiff.

Judge Wolff: And woman bailiff. I had the first woman bailiff. Actually we were the first all female court, but somebody in San Mateo County or some other county had publicized later on that she had the first female court. But the fact was we had it. And when I got a female bailiff, she was a woman in the sheriff’s office from Gilroy, and they wanted to assign her to Palo Alto and the Palo Alto judges called me and I guess Mark and said we’re not going to accept a woman bailiff because we’ve got a jail here and you’ve got all these people coming in and you don’t have adequate police protection and we don’t think it’s a good idea to have a woman bailiff. And Mark reported that to me and I said I don’t care. It’s fine with me to have a female bailiff. So I did get a woman bailiff. She really … she was my bailiff for maybe a year and was fine. But I think she really wanted to go back either to Gilroy or San Jose.

Ms. Cordell: That’s a long drive.

Judge Wolff: It was a long drive. And not a very good drive. And then I had another woman bailiff for a short time. And then I got a very good male bailiff who
was with me the rest of the time. Frankly it made little or no difference except he was a very good and accommodating bailiff.

Ms. Cordell: In 1975 when you came on the municipal court were there other women on municipal court?

Judge Wolff: No. No when Marilyn Zecker and I were appointed we were the first women judges actually appointed.

Ms. Cordell: And when you say first woman in Santa Clara County?

Judge Wolff: In Santa Clara County. And there was no woman judge in San Mateo County either.

Ms. Cordell: So you were the first woman municipal court judge in Santa Clara County’s history?

Judge Wolff: That’s right. Now, Alan Charles’ mother had been a justice of the peace in Palo Alto. Her husband had been justice of the peace and he died and she inherited his job and then went to law school and became a lawyer. At that time the justice of the peace did not have to be a lawyer.

Ms. Cordell: And who was this woman? What was her name?

Judge Wolff: Her name. I’ve forgotten her first name. Her last name was Charles.

Ms. Cordell: So she became a justice of the peace when her husband died basically filling his slot and then she went…

Judge Wolff: And then went to law school. She became a lawyer and remained justice of the peace in Palo Alto. So she actually was the first woman who served in the county in a judicial capacity.
Ms. Cordell: Interesting. So talk now about what was good about … before we get to that.

Were there any instances … how long were you on the bench first of all. ’75 to…

Judge Wolff: I was on the bench as a judge ten years.

Ms. Cordell: So … ’86?

Judge Wolff: Yes. Because 70 was mandatory requirement for retirement. Which I thought was a mistake, really. It never made very good sense to me. So what I did was indicate to the chief justice, who was Justice George, that I was available and would be happy to continue to serve by appointment, and so I continued.

I thought at the time that it might be kind of fun to sit in all the counties. Now if I’d wanted to sit in Los Angeles County, I could have sat permanently. But I tended to avoid that. I thought it would be interesting to see how courts in other counties functioned.

Ms. Cordell: I’m going to stop…So were there any experiences you had on the bench that came about because you’re being a woman. By that I mean I had a lawyer when I was on the bench, I had the lawyers approach the bench to explain something to me and the lawyer said well honey, this is what the lawyers called me, honey, and I was clearly taken aback and I had to have a conversation with this person because clearly he was trivializing my being on the bench, calling me honey. So and that’s just a function of men not getting it perhaps. Did you have any kind of experiences at all? Positive or negative, about…
Judge Wolff: I did not. I did not have anything similar to that. I guess partly, well I think your experience was fairly unusual. I think by then people had the message that you were treated as a judge. And I did not have any problem of that kind that I was aware of. I might have had a lot of people who didn’t want to appear before me, but they didn’t make it known. And …

Ms. Cordell: What did you like about judging?

Judge Wolff: Well, let me explain something. When Mark and I came on the bench the court that was absolutely overwhelmed was Los Gatos.

Ms. Cordell: Los Gatos is a city further south closer to San Jose.

Judge Wolff: Yes. And it was a one-judge court. Could we go off the record?

Ms. Cordell: Absolutely.

Judge Wolff: Alright. And so what had … his burden was overwhelming.

Ms. Cordell: This is the judge in Los Gatos.

Judge Wolff: The judge in Los Gatos. He was handling all of his criminal cases. In order to handle his civil cases, the judges in Sunnyvale were sitting for him one day a week in Los Gatos. Meanwhile the county just needed more judges…and Mark and I talked that over and I was … you know, I’d been running a port. I had a pretty good idea of logistics, and I said that was completely impractical. That what I suggested we do and what we put into effect was that he could send all of his civil cases to us that appeared to be going to trial. We’d both been lawyers in civil practice and we would either try them or dispose of them. Many civil cases are filed with the idea that once filed they will be disposed of easily, and that was fine, but if they were going to be time
consuming, to simply send them to us in Sunnyvale and we would take care of them, which meant that basically we did all of the civil trials in North County other than what were being done in Palo Alto. And to explain this, Sunnyvale was a city of 100,000 people. Palo Alto was a city of around then 35,000, I think.

Ms. Cordell: Well, Palo Alto now is a city of 60,000.

Judge Wolff: All right.

Ms. Cordell: But it may have been a smaller population then.

Judge Wolff: Anyhow, Sunnyvale is a very large community and was a very well run community, and we took all of the civil cases, and we did dispose of them. We were pretty good at settlement conferences, and we were pretty good trial judges. That was a lot better than our taking our time to go up to Los Gatos. So we had a very active civil calendar. In addition, both Mark and I sat every Friday for the Superior Court as Superior Court judges.

Ms. Cordell: Did you like doing civil better than criminal or did it matter to you?

Judge Wolff: Well civil – basically civil for a lawyer is much more challenging – and settlement conferences were a very important part of disposing of the civil calendar.

Ms. Cordell: So did you like judging, for ten years, did you like it?

Judge Wolff: Yes, I did. I don’t know. While it’s an interesting part of practicing law – to me it was a much easier job than being a lawyer.

Ms. Cordell: Why?
Judge Wolff: It’s more clear cut. Meanwhile, by the way, the minute I had become active in the retired judges, I had always been active with the Bar Association, and I became active with the retired judges group. And that seemed to me to be not very well organized. I had great support from the professional staff of the Bar, who agreed the Bar was not functioning well for retired judges. The Retired Judges Committee is now the largest committee of the State Bar. During my first tenure as Chair, I started the practice of having the Retired Judges Committee meet separately from the State Bar. Our first meeting was in Carmel, and we were overwhelmed by the attendance. Now it’s a regular thing where they meet in Monterey. I started that meeting in Monterey and Coronado as well. We organized the retired judges. We set up a very comprehensive program for a two-and-a-half day meeting. I think it’s now a very excellent committee doing a lot of very important work for the Bar Association.

Ms. Cordell: Did you ever become the presiding judge of the group.

Judge Wolff: No.

Ms. Cordell: And just explanation for those who don’t know what that is, presiding judge.

Judge Wolff: Well, a presiding judge is just what it’s name implies. In our court, since the courts were spread out, we were in the – I should explain that we were in the process of debating all of these things like consolidating the courts. They were at that point separate courts. We did succeed in getting them consolidated over a lot of objections by some of the court members. I noticed somewhere going through things that I had written a letter early on that the
courts needed consolidation. Superior and Municipal courts needed that. We were wasting a lot of time and effort in going our separate ways. And that consolidation was the only answer. We were just not utilizing all of our facilities.

Ms. Cordell: You were ahead of your time, if it’s indeed what happened.

Judge Wolff: But also it was effective.

Ms. Cordell: Uh huh.

Judge Wolff: During the time I sat on the court, I was very active. I did sit on a number of boards and commissions that I was very pleased and proud about such as the Library Board. Did we go into any of these?

Ms. Cordell: No.

Judge Wolff: And during that time when I came on the Board, the library was in the basement of the courthouse in San Jose. And of course computers were not what they are today. Only current reports were in the courthouse and current laws were in the individual courthouses. But if you wanted to do any research, you called the librarian and in due course the books that you needed would arrive. Well, that wasn’t a great system. And so the first thing that I became interested in was building a separate county library and to that end the team started exploring other libraries in other counties, and seeing how they worked, what they should look like. The then county librarian retired and we hired a new county librarian. We suggested that court fines -- fines had always included an amount for county library, and we suggested that amount be raised so that we could purchase property and get a county library. And
I’m pleased to say that we hired the architect. We met once a month. And we were a very good and effective library board, and that the county now has a county library. I was, by the way, the first woman ever to sit on the Library Board.

Ms. Cordell: What did it do?

Judge Wolff: I also chaired the Narcotics Abuse Commission for two terms. Alcohol and narcotics treatment. I chaired the Judicial Advisory Commission for a good deal longer than I wanted to. It’s an interesting commission. All state or federal money that goes to the county has to go through the Judicial Advisory Board. The Judicial Advisory Board’s recommendation to the Board of Supervisors is not binding, but they cannot expend the money without first receiving the advice of the Judicial Advisory Board. During the years I chaired the Board I tried to, and I think I succeeded, in visiting every facility that requested funding from us: the juvenile “farms,” the jail, alcohol and drug residential facilities, pre-delinquency facilities, hospitals -- so I had a pretty good idea of what really was available for judges to work with. During my tenure the big report and big question was the expansion of the jails. I visited jails all over to see how they operated. Santa Clara county was desperately overcrowded. And overcrowding leads to abuses that are mind boggling. So I, and most of the other judges, were very concerned with getting adequate jail and prison facilities. All of us were very concerned with the fact that there is no effort at rehabilitation. And we tried very hard, certainly Mark and I tried very hard to do some kind of rehabilitation. I
regularly, for example, sent people to alcohol counseling or drug counseling
knowing that most of it would fail, but that out of that one or two people
would at least learn the way to go there and get familiar with the process if
nothing else. We discovered of course that a lot of the people who came
before us regularly had – just didn’t have basic skills. They had never set an
alarm clock. They had never kept a budget. They lacked just the basis of
being able to live. And once in a while, and for a little while there’d be some
resource you could send them to, and then the resource would disappear. But
we kept on. Now I did sit on – in addition to the drug abuse commission – I
sat on the Alcohol Board which I didn’t think was succeeding in doing very
much.

Ms. Cordell: So if you had to pick one of the most rewarding things that happened or best
moment on the bench, and also I’m going to ask you to converse a worst
moment, and one that’s just God awful – something happened, either a case
you handled. Do you have any memory of either really, really good thing or
anything that stands out in your head. It could be a case, it could be an
interaction, whatever, while you were a judge.

Judge Wolff: Actually, there’s nothing I would put in that category. You know funny
things happen to you when you are a judge.

Ms. Cordell: Such as?

Judge Wolff: Such as I – I had two escapes from the courtroom. Those are really very
startling. One was – we should explain that in Santa Clara county, even
though Sunnyvale was – I always regarded Sunnyvale as my court. I sat
everywhere in the county. And for a while all civil cases were being handled
in – at least rental cases were being handled in Santa Clara. I also sat in Santa
Clara in criminal cases including a make-shift court in the Civic Center where
the defendant was in the next room with nobody around him. I had two
escapes from other courtrooms. One in San Jose – one in the basement in San
Jose. A woman went to the bathroom and went out through a window to the
consternation of bailiffs who ran after her and caught her. And then in my
courtroom in Sunnyvale, I had an instance where a woman came before me,
and the jury box was filled with, or was about to be filled with, defendants for
an arraignment calendar, all chained together. Except somehow there was one
man, it turned out later, who was not chained to the other. He was separate.
And this woman came, the sister it later turned out, the sister of that
defendant, and asked if her brother was going to be O.R.’d, released on his
own recognizance. I permitted everybody to come up to the bench at that
point, and I said I don’t have the O.R. report yet. They haven’t come to me,
but they will be in shortly. And she went back to her seat. I will tell you, I
never after that permitted anybody to come up to the bench other than
lawyers. So when the OR reports came in, there was a report, and the report
did not recommend releasing this man on his own recognizance. All of a
sudden there was a big flurry. The courtroom was packed with spectators
because of all the defendants that were there, and I realized that there was a
figure in a red jumpsuit running through the spectators to the back of the
courtroom, running out the courtroom out onto El Camino, crossing six lanes
of traffic apparently. I of course couldn’t see anything after he pushed through the spectators and left the courtroom. He jumped into a car and he was still in handcuffs. We’re next door to the police department. The police are there with shotguns. We had no metal detector. Anybody could walk in with anything. He had escaped. He was gone. The woman who went out the bathroom window was quickly apprehended. It turned out she was being arraigned for, among other things, a previous escape.

Ms. Cordell: There you go.

Judge Wolff: And we were down in the basement. If you’re interested in some of the more esoteric experiences, I remember – as I mentioned I always read to the people in the box, the defendants being arraigned, what they were charged with because it gave me an idea of what was before me. And because I’m a fast reader also. This one prisoner was being charged with many, many obscene phone calls, and he’s sitting in the box with all of the defendants being charged, including one being charged with murder, robbery, burglary, you know, very serious offenses – and this guy was making obscene phone calls. I go through this whole arraignment. The box was full. It was around lunchtime when they came in for arraignment, and at the conclusion there were various requests made by the defendants in the box. And then this voice from the back said, “Judge, would you give me a court ordered phone call.” And everybody in the box erupted in laughter as did everybody in the courtroom. So I said, well, I really didn’t think so.

Ms. Cordell: So you kept your sense of humor while you were on the bench, clearly.
Judge Wolff: I remember on one burglary charge, you had asked me for some of the anecdotes, and one burglary charge we were going through – the burglary had taken place when the victims were not at home. The victims were seeing the person arraigned for the first time, and one young woman was on the witness stand identifying the things that had been taken from her home – the television, clothes, etc. – and then she looked down at the first row of spectators and she said, “and that purse” which was being carried by a friend of the defendant, and the public defender who was defending said, “this purse”? And he took it from the young woman, and he said, how can you identify it as your purse? And she said, well I got some lipstick marks on the inside and so he opened the purse and there was the lipstick mark on the inside. I thought that was really pretty damning evidence. And I’m sure that the woman carrying her purse had no idea that she had a gift of the burglary.

Ms. Cordell: After that, the public defender says no further questions for the witness.

Judge Wolff: We started to talk about the implementation of Title VII and we never returned to it. In 1981 the Judicial Administration Division of the American Bar Association appointed a Committee consisting of Justice James Cameron, chair and Judges Sherman Kimball, Charles Richey, Thomas Wicker and myself and Jo-Ann Grace co-publisher of the Los Angeles Daily Legal newspaper to study the question of the membership of Judges in Clubs that invidiously discriminate. We met at Cherry Hill New Jersey, 30 minutes from the Philadelphia Airport. Among those appearing before the Committee was the immediate past president of Rotary International on behalf of Service
Clubs generally explaining how impossible it would be to persuade their Clubs in many foreign countries to even consider women for membership. In addition to the appearances before us we accepted many written statements from organizations and advocates interested in this issue. The five Judges agreed on the resolution we presented. The sense was that it was not appropriate that a Judge belong to a professional, business, social club or organization, which “invidiously discriminates on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, age, or sex.” The code of judicial conduct was to be changed accordingly. We also agreed that attorneys should have an equivalent obligation to avoid membership in such organizations. We were never able to persuade Jo-Ann Grace who filed a lengthy dissent based on freedom of association and religion. She recognized the associations in question were instrumental to access power, but argued it was not the role of the ABA to assure equal access. Basically the majority view has prevailed and the organizations have survived probably stronger, and fairer, than before.

One of the things you definitely can conclude sitting in court is that most criminals are really not very bright. You know, it wouldn’t take very much to create a better life for many of them if they had basic skills or were taken in hand earlier. I can’t say that I’ve had a lot of experience in juvenile court. I really tried to avoid juvenile court.

Ms. Cordell: Why?

Judge Wolff: I just did not think I was very well qualified to sit in juvenile court, and it was not until after I retired that I sat very much in juvenile court, and I still did not
feel entirely comfortable. And it’s never been really a part of my practice.
And I didn’t think I knew enough about how you handled people. But I did sit
on some juvenile court cases. I sat for a long time, almost a year, in San
Mateo county, because they had a judge who had heart bypass surgery. And
they were then, and probably still are, a very well run court, very efficient, and
they at that time were very shorthanded. They had a number of outlying
courthouses as well, just as Santa Clara county did.

Ms. Cordell: I remember when I came on the court in 1982, you had been there seven
years, you were a big help to me, because I didn’t know what to do, didn’t
know what to say and how to do things. And as I have a picture of you at my
swearing in at Stanford, I was sworn in – it was Judge Felton Henderson who
swore me in and there was a group of judges from the municipal court who
came up in 1982, and I have this picture of you there. Is there anything else
you want to say about judging?

Judge Wolff: Well I found it to be interesting, rewarding. Judges somehow think they’re
doing a very hard job. I don’t know why that’s their concept. It seems to me
it is a matter of making decisions – many of our judges have come out of the
criminal side of the law, a lot of prosecutors…

Ms. Cordell: A lot of prosecutors.

Judge Wolff: … and I think that they’ve forgotten a lot of their civil law and that’s made it
difficult for them. I think for judges who have been on the civil side, let me
put it this way, I found that you could settle almost any civil case that did not
have an emotional context. If you couldn’t settle it, you had to look for the

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emotional context. It often turned out to be that these people had been more than casual friends and that this was pretty much revengeful. I tried very hard to avoid sitting in domestic relations because it had not been part of my experience, and I never felt I could handle it adequately. Now that’s my idea of a really emotional court.

Ms. Cordell: True.

Judge Wolff: And so everything else I think is manageable by the court. I did do some arbitration after I retired. I wasn’t particularly interested in joining an arbitration group, but I had a lot of respect for judges who did, and I think they did a very good job and they’ve settled a lot of cases.

Ms. Cordell: But you weren’t ready to retire really?

Judge Wolff: No. And I did want to do more traveling, and I did enjoy the idea of having more free time. The problem with sitting for the court was that – which I did for ten years after I retired, on and off but mostly on. The problem was, once you commit yourself to sitting for the court, they would call and say, for example, I sat a lot in San Benito county, and they would say, judge it’s a three-day case. And that’s fine. And it was this three-day case. The problem was that then there would be motions afterwards. You had to remain available, and I liked the idea of being free so that if I wanted to go on vacation or I wanted to go East, or I wanted to do something, I wasn’t that tied down. However, if, you know, like all things it balanced out, and I did that a lot. I mean I sat a lot for other counties, and for Santa Clara county as well. In December of ’97 I became the victim of my airbag which exploded and it
crippled my right arm and did various other damages to my person, and so I withdrew and concentrated on working with Stanford.

Ms. Cordell: So any --

Judge Wolff: What I would explain, what I’ve been doing the last few years --

Ms. Cordell: That’s the next question.

Judge Wolff: Okay. A judge does not have to retire at age 70, but if you don’t retire at age 70, you lose some of the benefits of your retirement payment. I had to decide just what I wanted to do.

Before we leave my active working life, I want to mention that, in addition to being an active participant in legal associations, I also made it a point to actively participate in a number of social organizations concerned with improving the status of women. Zonta Club; A.A.U.W.; National Women’s Political Caucus. In addition, I was active in Calif. Academy of Science; N. Calif. Service League; Sunnyvale and Cupertino Chambers of Commerce; Historical Society of Sunnyvale; Stanford Alumni Association and the Stanford Club of Palo Alto (which I chaired a number of times).