Justice Fernande R.V. (“Nan”) Duffly was born in Indonesia to a Chinese mother and Dutch father. A year after her birth, political upheaval required the family to flee to the Netherlands, where she grew up speaking Dutch. Five years later, their refugee status helped the family gain entry to the United States, where they raised five children and pursued the “American dream.”

Justice Duffly attended the University of Connecticut, where she worked for a semester in the Tolland-Wyndham Legal Assistant Program. Her experience working with committed people who gave her a sense that, as a lawyer, she could acquire tools to make a difference was the catalyst for her decision to attend law school. Justice Duffly entered Harvard Law School in 1975 and was conscious of the composition of her class, specifically noting the lack of racial and gender diversity. In an effort to find the cause and propose a solution, she took her observations to the assistant dean. Recognizing that the problem included lack of diversity in the applicant pool and blind admissions, Justice Duffly requested funding for a group of supporters to visit feeder schools to encourage women and minorities to apply and pulled together a group of women mentors to provide support and guidance for applicants who received offers to attend. Her leadership in identifying the problem, creatively developing the solution, and building consensus in advancing opportunities for women in the profession has been repeated time and again throughout her career.

After graduating from Harvard in 1978, Justice Duffly began her career as a lawyer in the litigation department of Warner and Stackpole (now K&L Gates) and became the firm’s first woman litigation partner and partner of color in 1986. She was drawn to the firm because of the presence of other women lawyers and the firm’s commitment to pro bono work by its lawyers. She strongly encourages other lawyers to engage in pro bono work, hoping that through their efforts they can make a difference for people who cannot afford representation.

In 1992, Justice Duffly was appointed associate justice to the Massachusetts Probate and Family Court Department, where she served with distinction until 2000 when she was appointed associate justice to the Massachusetts Appeals Court. In 2011, Justice Duffly was nominated and confirmed as an associate justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the first Asian American member of that court.

Outside the courtroom, she has served on the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession, the ABA Commission on Hispanic Legal Rights and Responsibilities, and the Minority Caucus of the ABA. She is an ardent supporter of the Center for Women in Law at the University of Texas School of Law and its Women’s Power Summit on Law and Leadership and is a founding member of the Consortium for Advancing Women Lawyers. She has supported Harvard Law School’s women’s leadership conference, held every five years since her class organized the first Celebration 25 in 1978, honoring the first women graduates from HLS.

Justice Duffly has been involved with the National Association of Women Judges since 2002 and served as its president from 2007-2008. During her tenure as president, she initiated and promoted collaborative relationships between women judges, legislators, educators, and practitioners, working to increase diversity in the profession; she also has worked with governors and senators throughout the country to place more women on the bench in state and federal courts.

In addition, Justice Duffly was concerned when law firms began to be less transparent by using different measurements for, and definitions of, partner and equity partner that included women when reporting for purposes of diversity but excluded them when reporting profits per partner. She argued that “allowing firms to combine these categories obscures the fact that women and minorities may be under-represented in the full equity partnership ranks of most firms, yet may be over-represented in non-equity or partial equity partner positions.” She brought together a coalition of leading women lawyers, initially known as the Consortium, in an effort to persuade the National Association of Law Placement (NALP) to revise its data collection and reporting system. Ultimately, NALP revised its procedures, and most firms now distinguish between equity and non-equity partners, thus often revealing the true extent of women’s representation in the partnership ranks of large law firms.

Justice Duffly continues to advocate for and on behalf of women and minorities in the legal profession. Her advice, to women who have successfully passed through the glass ceiling, is to “use the power of your position to speak out and amplify the voices of the powerless; by increasing opportunities for women and other members of marginalized communities, we can fulfill the promise of our constitutional democracy.” Spoken like a true Margaret Brent Award honoree.