The daughter of a linoleum store owner in Manhattan, Judge Nancy Gertner and her father would stay up late into the night debating civil rights laws and gender issues until, finally fatigued, her father would forfeit and say, “Oh, go be a lawyer!” And that she did. As a young lawyer in her first high-profile case (and the case that put her on the map), Judge Gertner defended a lesbian radical feminist anti-Vietnam War activist accused of bank robbery and murder. Looking back, she says, “I have no idea why I took the case except that I could not acknowledge my own fear.” This was but the first of many times Judge Gertner faced challenging legal and social causes in her career.

Although educated at Barnard College and Yale Law School, Judge Gertner did not grow up affluent. Her ability to identify with clients on gender, racial, or class discrimination and her prodigious work ethic and skill quickly earned her a reputation in numbers of controversial cases. One of only a handful of women litigators in Massachusetts at the time, she won national recognition both as a criminal defense lawyer representing high-profile defendants as well as those in court-appointed cases, where she often worked pro bono, and as a civil rights attorney, taking on controversial abortion, sexual harassment, and discrimination cases. After three decades of successful private practice, civil and criminal, trials and appeals, federal and state courts, Judge Gertner was nominated by President Bill Clinton to the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Initially criticized for her “outspoken tendencies,” Judge Gertner ultimately was confirmed in 1994. Even by her conservative detractors, Judge Gertner is said to be a “voraciously fair” judge, widely respected and admired. Judge Gertner has run the gamut of from personally mentoring some of the criminal defendants who appeared before her, to challenging the FBI for its role in the wrongful conviction of four men, to reconfiguring jury selection processes, writing influential opinions on sentencing, to blogging for Slate Magazine. In particular, her decisions in women’s reproductive rights, sexual harassment, LGBTQ rights, and low-income women’s cases have opened the doors for many people who desperately needed a voice.

She retired from the bench in September, 2011.

While serving as judge, Judge Gertner also taught at Yale Law School and Harvard Law School, offering guidance to many students navigating their career and life choices. At Harvard, she proposed and developed the course, Gender, Race, Context, and Judging. Abroad, Judge Gertner has taught biannually for over a decade on women’s rights through her work with the Ford Foundation and the Yale China Law Project, serving as a mentor to a new generation of women’s rights lawyers in China. In addition, Judge Gertner helped draft a gender equality law in Vietnam with the Vietnam Women’s Union and Ministry of Justice.

A woman of many firsts, Judge Gertner served as the first public policy scholar of the Global Women’s Leadership Initiative to help shape legal presence in over 45 countries and was only the second woman to receive the Thurgood Marshall Award from the American Bar Association (the first being Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg). A frequent keynote speaker, lecturer, and panelist, Judge Gertner also has written her autobiography, In Defense of Women: Memoirs of an Unrepentant Advocate (2011), which details some of her cases that ensured that women’s rights and civil liberties were upheld in the courtroom. Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly named her one of the Most Influential Lawyers of the Past 25 Years. Most recently, Judge Gertner received the Women’s Bar Association of Massachusetts Lelia J. Robinson Award, which recognizes women who have captured the spirit of pioneering in the legal profession.

While a recreational kayaker, hiker, amateur astronomer, and devoted mother of three (grandmother of two), Judge Gertner is a self-described workaholic who often will stay up late in the night to finish cooking brisket, on the one hand, and review legal materials, on the other. Ensuring the rights of the underserved and powerless, promoting equal treatment for women and minorities, is her life’s work. One of her former law firm partners has said of Judge Gertner: “Something burns in her soul that detests injustice, hypocrisy, and cruelty.”

Judge Gertner’s bold activism, skilled mentorship, and accomplishments as a litigator, judge, and educator have fostered the advancement of women in the U.S. and abroad. Her achievements epitomize the noble characteristics of a Margaret Brent Award honoree.