Joan M. Hall's retirement from Jenner & Block LLP in 1999 did not mean that her career was ending. She simply set forth on a new chapter in her life.

After receiving a bachelor’s degree from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1961, Ms. Hall began graduate studies in sociology at Rutgers University in New Jersey. She soon realized that sociology was not a good fit, and upon completing one semester, she applied to law school. Ms. Hall was one of seven women in Yale Law School’s class of 1965 (the same number in its class of 1924). While not much had changed in those 41 years when it came to seeking employment either, she fortunately earned an interview with Jenner & Block and became just the second woman lawyer at the firm when hired in 1965. Initially, Ms. Hall worked with name partner Samuel W. Block and practiced both corporate law and litigation. Upon his death, she practiced commercial litigation, specializing in defending corporations in securities cases in federal court.

Ms. Hall achieved numerous firsts at Jenner. She was the firm’s first pregnant lawyer, and her personal sacrifices and firm leadership made it possible for those who followed to enjoy part-time policies, maternity and paternity leaves, and a more flexible law practice environment. Ms. Hall rose through the ranks to become Jenner’s second female partner and its first female litigation partner. In 1974, she became the first female chair of Jenner’s hiring committee, and under her leadership, seven of the 16 associates hired that year were women. In 1978, Ms. Hall became the first woman appointed to Jenner’s executive committee.

During the 1970s, she organized regular lunch meetings where Jenner’s women lawyers could share their common experiences and address common issues, a tradition that continues to this day. She insisted that a portion of each meeting be devoted to business development because she knew how important business development is to a lawyer’s achievement within a firm. Those luncheons have become what is now formally known as Jenner & Block’s Women’s Forum.

Her professional achievements as a trial lawyer are reflected in her being the first woman attorney in Illinois and the third woman lawyer in the country to be inducted into the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers. Indeed, the plaque she received in 1982 identified the honoree as a man; when she pointed out the presumption, she later was awarded a plaque with the correct gender. Also in 1982, she was elected the first female chair of the American Bar Association Section of Litigation, and she later served on the ABA’s Standing Committee on the Federal Judiciary, which screens all applicants for federal judgeships on all judicial levels.

In her leadership roles at Jenner, she oversaw a fundamental transformation in the firm that now includes women in every practice area, has advanced scores of women to partnership, and serves as a model of diversity in its hiring and promotion practices. Because of the pioneering work of Ms. Hall and those who followed her example, Jenner boasts one of the few female managing partners in the AmLaw 100.

Ms. Hall’s influence on the lives of women extends beyond the world of large law firms and the organized bar. Since 1997, she has been engaged in work on behalf of the Young Women’s Leadership Charter School (YWLCS), which has enabled hundreds of girls in Chicago to achieve their dream of obtaining a college degree and becoming leaders themselves. Ms. Hall led a team of 23 women to open the YWLCS, an all-girls public charter school for grades seven through 12. Through her vision in forming and leadership in sustaining the school, she is helping young women—especially young minority women—bridge the gap to technology-related careers. Her leadership position with the school led to her serving as an advisor to the Oprah Winfrey Foundation when Ms. Winfrey opened a similar school in South Africa.

Throughout her career, Ms. Hall has been a catalyst for change for and by women in the legal profession and has exhibited vision and leadership in fostering the advancement of women and young girls. She is the very definition of a Margaret Brent Woman Lawyer of Achievement.