The daughter of first-generation Italian immigrants, Mary Ann Hynes had never met a lawyer until she attended John Marshall Law School in the late ’60s. Her first introduction to the law was on her high school’s debate team, where she argued the merits of the United States joining NAFTA. Roughly three decades later, as general counsel of Corn Products International, she won the largest NAFTA award of its kind.

When Ms. Hynes started law school in 1967 at the age of 20, she was among a total of only seven women in her entire school. She never dreamed of becoming a senior executive officer and working mother of two when 32 years old, but break the glass ceiling she did.

Ms. Hynes is known and highly respected for her extensive experience in governance, compliance, and mergers and acquisitions, with a special focus on international growth, innovation, strategy, and risk management. She has worked in a variety of fields, including publishing, aeronautics, manufacturing, agriculture, and mining. Ms. Hynes’ success has been within the business world, one of the tougher work environments for women lawyers, and her career has been a series of “firsts.” Upon graduating from law school in 1971, she joined CCH, Inc., a leading provider of information services and software for tax, accounting, legal, and business professionals, as one of 300 legal editors. She ultimately became a member of the management committee, and in 1979, less than 10 years out of law school, she became the first general counsel of a Fortune 500 company—while pregnant with her second child. Ms. Hynes has noted that women would go up the stairs at CCH just to look at her, and psychology departments sent her questionnaires about her family and her background. After CCH was acquired by Wolters Kluwer US Corporation, she became its chief legal officer and general counsel.

In 1998, she joined Sundstrand Corporation-SNS as senior vice president, general counsel and secretary, and the following year, she became senior vice president and general counsel, chief legal officer for IMC Global Inc.-IMC and PLP. At Wolters Kluwer US, Sundstrand, and IMC Global, she was the first female officer at these multinational companies. From 2006-2012, she served as senior vice president, general counsel, corporate secretary and chief compliance officer of Ingredion Inc. (formerly Corn Products International, Inc.), and in 2013 she rose to senior vice president and counsel to the chairman. She later joined Dentons, where she presently is senior counsel and non executive director of GHD, Pty Ltd., an Australian-based company, one of the world’s leading professional services companies operating in the global markets of water, energy and resources, environment, property and buildings, and transportation.

Early on, Ms. Hynes realized that women needed mentors to help them navigate through corporate law. When she first joined The Chicago Network, an organization of many of Chicago’s most distinguished professional women where membership is by invitation only, she found very few women general counsel members. She became chair of its membership committee and was instrumental in recruiting other women general counsel to the organization.

From the beginning, Ms. Hynes has mentored women and worked tirelessly to advance women in the legal profession. Among her numerous volunteer activities, she has helped raise funds for scholarships for the Illinois Women’s Bar Foundation, has served on the ABA Task Force on Gender Equity in 2012-2013, and is involved with DirectWomen, whose mission is to place more women lawyers on corporate boards of directors. In recognition of her efforts on behalf of women lawyers, InsideCounsel magazine established the Mary Ann Hynes Pioneer Award. One of several transformative leadership awards, this award is presented to a woman general counsel who has transformed being the “first” into being a catalyst for change. In 2014, InsideCounsel hosted the inaugural Mary Ann Hynes Institute, a two-day, hands-on intensive leadership institute for women recognized as being ready to become general counsel in Fortune 500 companies within the next three years.

Throughout her career, while continuing to move up in the corporate world and breaking through that glass ceiling time and again, she has served as a role model and has focused on advancing more women into positions of authority, within board rooms, corporate C-suites, and law firms. Her dedication and achievements are the hallmarks of a Margaret Brent Award honoree.