

Gladys Kessler

On the federal bench, as judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, and in practice, Judge Gladys Kessler changed the way we think about women in the law and women and the law. She is a trailblazer and an inspiration; a person of courage, integrity, and sensitivity; a keen strategist; and a relentless advocate for the rights of women, minorities, and children.

As a young lawyer, she was a co-founder of the Women's Legal Defense Fund, which represented women who were not receiving legal assistance in situations involving domestic violence, child support, job discrimination, and lack of employment benefits. In 1977, Judge Kessler was appointed to the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, where her prodigious output and careful judging quickly earned her a reputation as one of its finest jurists. Her efforts at building a vigorous and compassionate family court, which had been lacking in the local court system, were especially noteworthy. She served on the D.C. trial bench for 17 years and helped make it a model for the nation. While on the bench, Judge Kessler also was instrumental in establishing one of the first ABA-sponsored Multi-Door Dispute Resolution Programs, which became a model for courts around the nation and offers expedited dispute resolution services to litigants, many of whom are women. Judge Kessler also organized the D.C. Domestic Violence Coordinating Council, which has functioned effectively for approximately 25 years and actively promoted procedures for the protection of abused women.

In 1994, President Clinton appointed her to the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Since that time, Judge Kessler has adjudicated with distinction an array of complex, important cases that required extensive management and outstanding analytic capacity. These include the U.S. Department of Justice's suit against the tobacco industry (the largest civil case in U.S. history), a constitutional challenge to the Affordable Care Act, and significant cases involving detention at Guantanamo and allegations of torture, the Endangered Species Act, Vice President Cheney's energy task force, the administration of the Medicaid program in Washington, DC, and issues of civil rights (voting, employment, and housing).

Judge Kessler was one of 60 women judges who met in 1979 and founded the National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ). She later chaired the second annual meeting and became the third president of the association, providing early leadership essential to the establishment of NAWJ as a viable organization dedicated to preserving judicial independence and ensuring diversity and equality in the system of justice and on the bench. Judge Kessler was heavily involved in NAWJ's trailblazing judicial gender bias task forces and has been a relentless advocate for greater diversity on the bench at all levels.

Since 1999, Judge Kessler has been a working board member (and chair from 2006 to 2007) of Our Place DC, a nonprofit organization that provides gender-specific direct services and advocacy to help formerly incarcerated women as they transition out of the criminal justice system. She took senior status in 2007 and four years later was appointed by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roberts to serve on the U.S. Judicial Conference Committee on Defender Services.

During her tenure on the federal bench, Judge Kessler has been assisted by over 40 law clerks, and a conservative estimate is that over 70 percent were women. As one former clerk has stated, Judge Kessler gave "wise counsel on any number of matters large and small, professional and personal," doing "that important work of building the next generation of young lawyers."

Judge Kessler has devoted her career to fighting for women in the profession and for advocating that issues involving women, children, and families receive the same attention and respect as other serious issues that come before the courts. She is the epitome of the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award honoree.

