The doctor who arrived through a severe snowstorm in Coraopolis, Pennsylvania to deliver Allie Latimer said she would not survive. However, the doctor later announced that baby Allie had “made it through the struggle.” This was not the last time that Allie Latimer would defy odds and overcome struggles. Her life is an example of not only how she broke down barriers herself, but also how, for more than five decades, she has worked tirelessly to help women, minorities, and many other marginalized people overcome barriers.

Ms. Latimer dedicated much of her early life to promoting equality for African Americans, especially as related to voting rights in the South. As the president of the local chapter of the Presbyterian Interracial Council, she herself went and also sent members to Selma, Alabama to encourage African Americans to vote despite the threat of voter arrests. Ms. Latimer also courageously led a group to Alabama to join the freedom march from Selma to Montgomery.

Upon receiving her undergraduate degree, Ms. Latimer went on to receive a J.D. from Howard University as “a means of surviving some of the ills of the nation and the survival of people.” After being denied the right to take the bar exam based upon a technicality, Ms. Latimer persevered, continuing on to complete her LL.M. at Catholic University in Washington, DC.

In 1957, after a short time in private practice, she went to work for the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), starting at the GS-7 entry level. After almost 20 years at the GSA, she moved to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to work as an assistant general counsel, and one year later she returned to the GSA. In 1977, she became general counsel of the GSA and thereby made history on several fronts: the first woman and the first African American to hold the office of general counsel in a major federal agency and the first woman and the first African American to attain GS-18 level in the agency. She directed a staff of over 150 attorneys.

While serving at the GSA, Ms. Latimer became troubled by the fact that salary and qualification restrictions for women made certain employment, such as with the FBI and the police, prohibitive for women. In 1968, she cofounded Federally Employed Women (FEW) and became its first president. FEW is now a national organization with over 200 chapters and advocates for women employed in the federal government through various legislative and training programs. Her efforts to help women and minorities gain access to the federal government are legendary, especially in legal positions, which traditionally had been closed to both groups.

A matriarch of the National Bar Association, Ms. Latimer was a co-founder of its women’s division and served as secretary for 10 years and as a member of the association’s board of directors. Among her more than 50 awards and citations, she has received Presidential Rank Awards from Presidents Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan and the GSA’s Distinguished Service Award. Ms. Latimer has been inducted into the National Bar and the Washington Bar Associations Halls of Fame and also the National Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.

In 1997, Ms. Latimer retired from federal service after a 40-year career with the federal government. She remains active doing pro bono work for women and the elderly and continues to recruit young women to enter the legal profession.

Throughout the years, Ms. Latimer has combined her advocacy for equity in her professional life with activism and service for social justice in her personal life. Numerous volunteer projects starting as early as college led Ms. Latimer in later years to continue her studies in completing two additional advanced degrees, a master and a doctorate of ministry. In addition to this outreach, she has traveled to more than 80 countries, attending legal, women’s, and church conferences. In 1994, Ms. Latimer monitored the national elections in Malawi and in 1995 was part of a delegation with the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights to the International Women’s Conference in China.

After growing up in her grandmother’s house in historic Montgomery, Alabama, where a sense of community and caring for the common good was instilled early on, Ms. Latimer has dedicated her life to public service and leading by example. Her decades of success in the legal and public service fields, along with support to women, minorities, and marginalized groups, exemplify the values the Margaret Brent Award was created to recognize.