Marygold Shire Melli clearly remembers her first day as a University of Wisconsin—Madison law student in 1947. She opened the door to the classroom and thought, “My lord, Margo, it’s a men’s gym class.” At the time, there were perhaps 15 women in the entire student body, and she “always thought again about going into the room.” But enter she did—the room, the legal profession, and ultimately the law faculty.

Graduating second out of a class of 191 students in 1950, Professor Melli was one of seven women. Despite her academic success, she faced numerous barriers when embarking on her legal career. The dean refused to include her name on the interview list for law firms, saying, “None of the law firms would hire you, why would I waste their time?” She nonetheless remained positive, and a faculty member who saw her potential steered her into a fellowship that gave her an opportunity to revise the Wisconsin Criminal Code.

Upon completing the fellowship, Professor Melli took a research position with the Wisconsin Legislative Council. Later, she participated in large-scale research projects on the Wisconsin Code. As a result of this research, the legislature reformed Wisconsin’s child support system, and that served as a model for the federal government when it mandated that all states adopt child support guidelines.

In 1959, Professor Melli returned to the University of Wisconsin Law School as the first female member of the tenure-track faculty. While she found the law faculty to be extremely supportive, she did not find others who shared her interest in family law. At that time, family law was called “domestic relations law,” and one colleague said that if she taught family law, everyone would think that was the only subject the law school would let her teach. Professor Melli, however, thought it was a field of law on the verge of a revolution. She developed the law school’s curriculum for family law. As an academic, she continued her teaching and research in the areas of family law and children’s issues. Her body of scholarly work grew extensively, and she became a well-known and highly-regarded expert in the areas of family, juvenile, and criminal law—the areas she calls the “people-handling parts of the law.”

With her background in research and contributions to the university, Professor Melli often has been called upon to serve as a leader on campus. In 1980, she served as chair of the University of Wisconsin Chancellor’s Task Force on Gender Equity. The study produced by the task force was one of the first of its kind, focusing on the role of women at the university by evaluating opportunities for female faculty and staff, as well as employment practices, sexual harassment, and curriculum. Her leadership and success on that committee led her to serve as the co-chair of the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents’ Task Force on the Status of Women in 1989. For her efforts supporting women’s issues, Professor Melli received the University of Wisconsin System Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Advancement of Women in Higher Education.

Professor Melli has been involved at several levels in the bar examination process. She served as vice-chair of the Wisconsin Supreme Court’s Board of Lawyer Competence and as chair of the National Conference of Bar Examiners. She has received numerous awards, including the Wisconsin Law Foundation’s Belle Case LaFollette Outstanding Professional Award for outstanding service to the profession.

Today a Voss-Bascom Professor of Law Emerita at the University of Wisconsin Law School, Professor Melli served as a role model at a time when there were few role models for women thinking of entering the legal profession. She would insist that others had done a great deal, but she said that she would turn family law into a field involving “real law.” And so she did.