

2007 Margaret Brent Awards

Marva Jones Brooks



“Always take the high road.” This philosophy is the cornerstone of Marva Jones Brooks’ legal career and has led her down not only the high road but also roads not taken.

In 1980, the former mayor of Atlanta, the late Maynard Jackson, appointed Ms. Brooks to become the first female—and the first African-American—city attorney in the history of Atlanta. At that time, most large governmental bodies, particularly in the South, had only men in the role of chief legal officer. Her appointment heralded a new era for women and African-American attorneys throughout the country as the Jackson administration, with her involvement, set a new standard for major American cities in diversity of leadership and in equal financial opportunity in government contracting.

The following year, the next mayor, Andrew Young, retained Ms. Brooks as his chief legal officer. She used her leadership role as city attorney to encourage other women lawyers to become involved in public service. She appointed many talented young women attorneys to key leadership positions in the city law department and mentored them so they could build resumes that would enable them to move on to successful careers in public service and private practice. As one of her mentees at that time has described, this was a political world where one’s “practice unfolds on the front page of the newspaper. Governmental clients often have different agendas that conflict. I watched and learned with amazement as Marva corralled these differing viewpoints and fashioned them into a coherent legal position for the city.”

In 1990, Ms. Brooks moved into private practice with Arnall Golden Gregory, LLP in Atlanta. One year later, she was recruited to serve as associate general counsel for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, a role she held from 1991 through 2000. Ms. Brooks was one of the two highest-ranking women involved in the 1996 Olympic Games and earned the respect and admiration of both the U.S. and

the International Olympic Committees.

On the national level, Ms. Brooks served on the Board of Trustees of the National Conference of Bar Examiners from 1998-2004 and became chair in 2005. She was elected president of the International Municipal Lawyers Association for the 1989-90 term.

Ms. Brooks remains active in local community organizations. Among her many leadership positions in professional, civic, charitable, and business organizations, she has served on the Board of Trustees of Bennett College (one of the few women-only historically black colleges and universities). She also has served as the directors of the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and the Atlanta Business League. In many of these roles, she was among the first women to occupy leadership positions at the board level. She set the example and served as a trailblazer for other professional women who saw her success and how she laid the groundwork for those accomplishments, thereby making it easier for others to follow in her footsteps.

Time and again, colleagues report young women on opposing sides in lengthy negotiations who were so enthralled with Ms. Brooks’ reputation and leadership skills that they were inspired to set their goals higher and pursue them more vigorously. Time and again, women say that they entered public legal service because they wanted to emulate her career path. Women whom she has mentored consistently describe how she taught them how to practice law with grace and dignity and how to be true to the law without taking sides. In other words, she showed them by way of her own example how to “take the high road.” In true Margaret Brent Award fashion, she has walked the talk.

Margaret Brent