

2006 Margaret Brent Awards

Ellen Godbey Carson



Ellen Godbey Carson grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of east Tennessee during the turbulent 1960s. Inspired by the civil rights movement, she decided to become a lawyer “to help preserve people’s rights and protect people from majoritarian abuses.” Impatient to begin, she dropped out of high school, was accepted by the University of Tennessee without a high school diploma, and graduated *summa cum laude* in three years with a bachelor’s degree in constitutional law. She later received her J.D. from Harvard Law School, from which she also graduated with honors.

While working at a Washington, D.C. law firm, Ms. Carson spent seven years litigating a suit up to the U.S. Supreme Court representing the National Council for Japanese American Redress, on behalf of 120,000 Japanese-American men, women, and children who were interned in prison camps during World War II. In her quest to live in a diverse environment, she chose to move to Hawaii because “it has no racial majority and has a wonderful racial and cultural diversity.”

Ms. Carson joined a law firm and worked mainly in civil litigation involving business transactions, tort, and constitutional issues. She now is a director with the Honolulu law firm of Alston Hunt Floyd and Ing, where she continues in civil litigation and concentrates her practice in health law and dispute resolution. Ms. Carson spends countless hours performing volunteer work. She is the second woman to serve as president of the Hawaii State Bar Association and one of its youngest presidents. She used her presidency as a vehicle for social change to involve citizens in the justice system. She convened the “Citizens Conference on Rethinking the Civil Justice System,” which brought together people from diverse communities to discuss proposed changes and implement innovations.

Ms. Carson is a tireless advocate for civil rights and against discrimination and injustice in the legal system.

She fought to change the policies of private clubs that discriminate against women, to ensure the religious rights of inmates in prison, to prevent discrimination against families with children, to ensure safe and legal access to abortion services, and to obtain legal redress for the injuries of victims of rape and sexual assault. She has even turned one of her favorite hobbies—sewing quilts—into a public service activity. Her creations, which may take 40 to 120 hours to complete, are often donated to charity.

Ms. Carson served as the president of the Institute for Human Services, which operates homeless shelters in Honolulu, and for the Hawaii Sex Abuse Treatment Center and the Washington, D.C. Rape Crisis Center. In addition, she has been president of the Hale Kipa Emergency Youth Shelter and the Hawaii Women Lawyers, who honored her with the “Outstanding Woman Lawyer Award.” She also received the YWCA’s award for Outstanding Woman in the Professions, the Hawaii State Bar Association’s Pro Bono Award for Community Service, and the Hawaii Foodbank’s Na Hoku Malamalama Award for Service.

To many, her most significant impact on women has been to help open doors for them to succeed in law and business by creating networking opportunities for women to overcome the “Old Boys Network.” This includes monthly lunches for women lawyers to come together and share tips and questions on everything from clients to baby-sitters to becoming partner at a law firm. Through her practice and social activism, Ms. Carson continuously seeks to empower women to take control of their careers, choose the kind of lawyer they want to be, and do the kind of work they want to do. She provides an inspiring example of a woman lawyer of achievement.