

2005 MARGARET BRENT AWARDS

Carolyn Dineen King



Carolyn Dineen King is the daughter of two lawyers, the sister of two lawyers, the wife of a federal judge, and the mother of a law student. In 1959, she graduated summa cum laude from Smith College with a plan to get a Ph.D in philosophy and to teach, however, she concluded that a lifetime with philosophers wouldn't work, and she enrolled in the Yale Law School. In 1961, she worked in the summer honors program at the Department of Justice, and discovered that lawyering was her passion.

Judge King graduated from Yale in 1962 and moved to Houston. She received an exemplary reference from the chief of the Tax Division in the Department of Justice. But the United States Attorney in Houston turned her down for employment, cheerfully confessing that he was not up to hiring a woman. Later that year, Fulbright & Jaworski made an offer to hire Judge King, but it took some negotiating on her part to obtain the same starting salary as the men. She spent ten years at Fulbright, gaining a reputation as an exceptional corporate securities lawyer. The firm, however, was not yet ready to make her a partner, and Judge King moved on to another firm. Happily, Fulbright later made her a partnership offer, but by then she had found another calling.

In 1979, Judge King was approached by the head of the Merit Selection Committee appointed by President Carter to find judges for the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. The President was looking for a woman from the western half of the Circuit. As a securities lawyer, Judge King had no interest in being on a court and initially declined the invitation to apply. In addition, she was a Republican. The President did not care about her party affiliation. What mattered to him was that she was a good lawyer and a woman--the very quality that had previously been such a liability to progress for her. Judge King's commitment to public service eventually won out, and she applied for the position. Shortly thereafter, Judge King became the second woman to sit on the Fifth Circuit. In 1999, she became the Fifth

Circuit's first female Chief Judge, and in 2002, at the request of Chief Justice Rehnquist, she became the first woman to chair the Executive Committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States.

Judge King is a brilliant, prolific jurist, having authored more than 4,400 opinions in her twenty-six years on the bench. As Chief Judge, she has addressed the needs of the Southwest border courts by obtaining new judge-ships and other resources to handle the overload of criminal cases. In her role as Chairman of the Executive Committee, Judge King took the lead in developing a major cost containment strategy to enable the federal courts to cope with shrinking appropriations.

Judge King is a member of the Council of the American Law Institute. She has spent her entire life involved in human services, educational and cultural organizations. For many years, she was a member of the Board of Trustees and the Management Committee of the United Way and served as chief financial officer. She chaired the Board of Trustees of the University of Saint Thomas and served on the Board of Trustees of one of Houston's largest hospitals.

Hundreds of women are beneficiaries of Judge King's leadership and inclusive decision-making style. More than half of her law clerks since 1979 have been women. She actively encourages women to apply for judicial positions and includes women judges in key positions of leadership. She also counsels women professionals on balancing work and family. Judge King's story is one of pioneering, perseverance and commitment.