

# **Ruth Reardon O'Brien**

**1931-**

By Heather Peddie Professor Babcock Women's Legal History May 13, 1997

---

Table of Contents

Timeline

I. Introduction

II. From Worcester, Massachusetts to Yale Law School

III. From Yale Law School to Raising Six Children

IV. The Biggest Challenge of Ruth's Life

V. Ruth's Successful Tenure at Ropes & Gray

VI. Conclusion

VII. The Future of this Biography

Bibliography

---

Timeline RUTH REARDON O'BRIEN

1930	<p>born in Worcester, MA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Irish Catholic family</li> <li>-2 brothers (both became attys)</li> <li>-father = laborer</li> </ul>
1949	<p>graduated from high school          started Vassar</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Helen Lockwood's effect</li> <li>-Dorothy Day</li> <li>-Father Fitz</li> <li>-wrote report on lack of legal services for poor in Dutchess County</li> </ul>
1953	<p>graduated from Vassar          began Yale Law School</p>
1956	<p>graduated from YLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-VP of student govt</li> <li>-4 other women in class</li> </ul>
1956-57	<p>clerked for Chief Judge Raymond Wilkins, Mass. Supreme Judicial CT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-interviewed w/ Boston law firms - crazy stories</li> </ul>
1957-58	<p>worked at Ropes &amp; Gray</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-generalist work</li> <li>-one other women started 2/6 were women</li> <li>-Dewey Ballantine story</li> </ul>
1958	<p>married Tom O'Brien, M.D.</p>
1958-59	<p>moved to Texas</p>
1959-60	<p>back at R &amp; G</p>
1960	<p>first child born</p>
1960-71	<p>stayed at home w/ kids</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-worked for establishing the Peace Corp in 1961-1962</li> <li>-had five kids</li> </ul>
1971	<p>ran into Hiring Prtnr of R&amp;G &amp; he asked her to return</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-negotiations w/ R&amp;G</li> <li>-kids were first priority</li> <li>-had to be home by 6:30</li> <li>-couldn't travel</li> </ul>
Oct. 5, 1971	<p>returned to R&amp;G in the real estate dept - easier to control her schedule</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-biggest challenge of her life</li> <li>-didn't remember anything</li> <li>-had to look everything up</li> <li>-worked under the tutelage of another female atty</li> <li>-hired a housekeeper</li> </ul>
Dec. 1972	<p>last child born</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-wanted to take time off b/c she was sick, but R&amp;G needed her</li> </ul>
1977	<p>started working full time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-pressure from clients to work full time</li> </ul>
1978	<p>made partner (2d woman)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-shocked -politeness training had prevented her from asking about her partnership chances</li> <li>-in '70s, law firms realized they had to make women partners to attract good women attys</li> </ul>
Late 1970's thru 1990's	<p>hurt back and had eight operations; often in full body cast; missed months of work; secretary would bring work to her home/hospital</p>
Dec. 1996 thru late 1997	<p>Retired from R &amp; G</p>

	Plans to begin working part time at Greater Boston Legal Services
--	---

---

## RUTH REARDON O'BRIEN 1931 -

Some may think Ruth O'Brien has accomplished the impossible. In the midst of raising six children, she was invited to join the partnership of a prestigious old Boston law firm. While ascending to partnership and raising a family is remarkable at any time, the fact she was the second woman elected to partnership in the history of Ropes & Gray is especially noteworthy. Ruth accomplished many, "impossibles" in part because she followed the counsel of her parents. Her father believed that those who are honest and do their work well will eventually succeed and that Ruth should not allow anyone to hold her back. Additionally, Ruth's mother emphasized the importance of good manners and always striving to achieve the most possible. In following their advice, Ruth overcame prejudice against Irish Catholics to earn a full scholarship to Vassar, she was one of four women in her class at Yale Law School, she landed a prestigious clerkship on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, she successfully fought her way back to good health, while still working, through eleven years of hip and back operations, and she became one of the most senior and respected partners in the real estate department of a large Boston law firm. Finally, throughout her career, despite the pressures of a large corporate law firm practice, Ruth always managed to prioritize her family first.

Ruth O'Brien's most defining traits have proved invaluable to her every step of the way. Throughout her life, her wonderful sense of humor, her dogged work ethic and her ability, to work well with others has greatly, enabled her to circumvent many of the obstacles facing women professionals. Like her father, Ruth has the ability to laugh, she "refuse[s] to let life's troubles get [her] down."<sup>1</sup> She says "I will always be indebted to my father for his lesson that nothing is ever so bad that you can't find a way to laugh at it."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she is an extraordinarily hardworking and appreciative person who prides herself in drawing the best out of those associated with her. In describing her life, she downplays her hard work and instead talks of the great people who surrounded her and helped her succeed. Finally, her grace and "good manners" have allowed her to work productively with even the most disagreeable people without condescending to their level, an ability that has aided her in accomplishing her goals.

I decided to write about Ruth O'Brien last summer after enjoying a lunch during which she regaled me with stories from her legal career. As a summer associate working in Ropes & Gray's real estate department, I was invited to join the department's daily lunch time soiree. Ruth O'Brien briefly related to me some anecdotes from when she interviewed with Boston law firms. While attorneys' behavior in these stories was offensive and depressing, she recalled them with humor. In hearing her experiences, I realized that I did not appreciate how lucky I was and I suspected that many other young female attorneys were similarly unaware. Now when we sign up for interviews we may worry about the color of our suits, not whether the law firms' clients will refuse female counsel or that the interviewer will badger us with questions about our love life. We, as young women attorneys, must learn about what our predecessors endured and accomplished despite the hostile forces they faced. Although sexism in the legal profession is less obvious today, it still can manifest itself in more subtle and perhaps more insidious forms. By learning about the female pioneers of the field, we can build upon their achievements and never allow the profession to slide backwards. The first step is documenting the experiences of our predecessors.

In interviewing Mrs. O'Brien for this paper I became even more impressed by her and her life story. As a young woman about to embark on my own career, I found the inspiration I was seeking. Her life story should not only hearten us but also force us to reflect upon our own expectations, style and priorities. There are several constants in Ruth O'Brien's life: her family and children have always been her number one priority regardless of the other pressures she felt; she often accomplished that which conventional wisdom dictated impossible; she found humor in all things; she is hardworking and humble at all times; and, finally, her personal achievements have advanced the status of women in the law. Although she never advocated for women's rights, she still has done a great deal to forward the plight of women in the legal profession through an exemplary life and career.

#### From Worcester, Massachusetts to Yale Law School

Ruth Reardon was born on December 16, 1931. Like her future husband, Tom O'Brien, she was raised in an Irish Catholic family in Worcester, Massachusetts. She has two older brothers, Edward and James Reardon, who both practice law in Worcester today. Though her father, James Reardon, quit school after the eighth grade to work and support his family, "he had a great influence on [Ruth] going to law school because lots of people thought it might not be a good idea." He always encouraged Ruth and her brothers to pursue what they wanted regardless of what others thought. Her mother, Ruth Powers, was a teacher who valued education and proper decorum. Ruth's parents instilled in Ruth the belief that people must excel with their own ambition and intelligence, not their family's name or heritage.

After a successful high school career, Ruth decided she wanted to attend Vassar College because her mother had always revered Vassar as a college that "the finest young women in the country" attended. Ruth's mother, when she was young, had taken carriage trips around Poughkeepsie with her uncle and his great admiration for Vassar students had impressed her. Fortunately, Vassar College had a full scholarship program for young women, like Ruth, whose families could not afford an elite education. To young Ruth's dismay, though, her high school guidance counselor advised her that "those people will never give that scholarship to the daughter of an Irish Catholic family" and that she should only consider Catholic colleges. At dinner that night, Ruth's father exclaimed that the counselor was "a very ignorant woman" regardless of her degrees, and that "real people do not act that way anymore." Again his belief, one that Ruth eventually adopted, was that the good people of the world judge others by their accomplishments and ambitions, not by their heritage, gender or ethnicity. Ruth's father proved to be correct and Ruth soon embarked on an extremely successful and life-defining experience at Vassar College. Not only did Ruth receive a full scholarship to attend Vassar, but she also later won a graduate fellowship from Vassar to attend Yale Law School.

Ruth's experiences at Vassar College were some of the most influential in her early life. She describes it as a place where she met "people outside my family who would change my life."<sup>3</sup> Although Ruth was involved with student government and enjoyed spending time with her friends, Ruth's interactions with faculty members and the speakers she brought to campus were the most meaningful to her. Professors C. Gordon Post and Helen Lockwood "decided that [Ruth] should go to law school, and that [she] should go to Yale."<sup>4</sup> To this end, they urged Ruth to conduct a two year study of the "crying need" for legal aid in Dutchess County as her senior thesis in political science. Two years later Ruth's study was published by the New York State Bar Association and she was ushered around the county to discuss her results. Legal aid, as a consequence of Ruth's study, was later introduced in Dutchess County for criminal and civil litigants.

Professor Helen Lockwood, Chair of the English department, remains large in Ruth's mind to this day. She has felt Professor Lockwood looking over her shoulder throughout her life and would love to "have her ear now and let her know how important she was." Professor Lockwood believed that women were given brains so they could use them, not so a man could take over. She taught Ruth to state her case and defend it, a prerequisite for the practice of law. As Ruth points out, women were, at that time, raised to be compliant, not assertive. Ruth's mother was a stickler about etiquette (she gave Ruth a copy of Emily Post's Blue Book of Social Usage when Ruth was twelve) and she believed it was not in good taste or attractive for women to have too many opinions. Professor Lockwood, on the other hand, trained her young female students to do their research, develop a solid opinion and, most importantly, defend it without falling apart when challenged. Ruth said that although it was a new way of

thinking, it was good training for law school. In fact, Professor Lockwood's training was "what being a good attorneys is all about."

The other two people Ruth cites as highly influential during her time at Vassar were not associated with the college. Ruth, as President of the Catholic Newman Club, invited a Franciscan monk, Father Fitzsimmons, and the founder of the Catholic worker movement, Dorothy Day, to speak at the Club's retreats about their work. "Father Fitz" was a priest on the docks of New York City working under the guard of Lucky "Three Finger" Lucchese, a mob crime boss and Dorothy Day was an activist and founder of a settlement house on Chrystie Street. In addition to talking about their vocations, the speakers spent time discussing the challenge of living responsible lives as a decent caring people. They encouraged the students to do what they could for others. In particular, Ruth liked learning more about the settlement house from Dorothy Day and although Ruth declined Dorothy's offer to work there after college, Ruth did promise to work for legal aid one day.

Ruth applied to law school in 1953, her senior of Vassar. She was accepted by both Harvard Law School, which had just started admitting women, and Yale Law School, which had officially welcomed female students since 1918.<sup>5</sup> Ruth first traveled to Cambridge. She went to ask questions about law school and life as a female law student since she had never known any women who had gone to law school. The Harvard administrator answered her inquiries abruptly, "Look, if you don't know you want to go to Harvard Law School, then I don't have time to talk to you." Fortunately, Ruth had better luck at Yale and her decision was easy. The Yale Law School registrar, Elsa Wools, went out of her way to welcome Ruth to New Haven and set up appointments for her to see the school, meet the Dean and have lunch with a woman law student. Yale had accepted female law students for years and was therefore prepared to accommodate them. Before Ruth left New Haven, the registrar had found a place for her to live off campus with her classmates from Vassar who were planning to attend graduate school at Yale also.

Ruth remembers Yale Law School fondly, and often attends her class reunions. She thinks that Yale Law School was a "great place to go to law school" and that "it made a huge difference to go to Yale" where there had been a few women in most classes, "women ... weren't unseen animals there." While she was at Yale, Ruth was never conscious of any difference between the men and the women and never felt any "anti-women sentiments." In fact, she was elected Vice President of student government. While there were three other women in Ruth's class at Yale, the class of 1956, she spent more time with the women she lived with and has not kept in touch with her fellow female students after law school.

#### From Yale Law School to Raising Six Children

After Helen Lockwood, the second great influence in Ruth's legal career was Chief Judge Raymond Wilkins of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. When she interviewed with him, she was immediately struck by his enthusiasm for the law, "[h]e- just couldn't wait to get to the office each morning, . . . [h]e often came to work with scraps of notes that he had jotted down at 4:00 in the morning because the legal bug had awakened him."<sup>6</sup> Obtaining the clerkship, as a female graduate of Yale Law School, the rival of judge Wilkins' alma mater was not an easy task. Judge Wilkins asked her why he should hire her, especially since he was President of the Harvard Alumni Association and had received stacks of qualified Harvard students' resumes. Displaying her charm and commitment to hard work, Ruth retorted that, despite the fact she was not at the top of her class, she wanted the job more than the Harvard men and that she would work harder than they would. She won the job and clerked for the Chief judge during the 1956-1957 term.

Under the judge's guidance, Ruth interviewed with several Boston law firms during her clerkship. Though she had expressed interest in legal aid work before law school, her humility and desire to provide only the best service steered her towards working at a law firm first. She was concerned about her inexperience and sought out law firm training in the fundamentals before she attempted to help the poor and destitute. Most female law students would now cringe at some of the anecdotes from Ruth's interviews. Ruth's sensibility and ability to find humor in most situations, however, enabled her to survive this process with her pride and ambition to practice law still in tact.

Ruth's approach to these interviews was to find a law firm that would hire her as an attorney even though she was a woman, not to fight the systemic discrimination against women in the legal profession. While she knew that many thought that female attorneys were "taking the place of a man who is going to have to support a family," she still believed that "firms would look for someone who was good at their work, easy to get along with and reliable and if you could deliver on those things, it wouldn't matter if you were a woman." Again Ruth believed, as her father taught her, that if she would perform well on the job, they would hire her. Though her view may sound idealistic, it was not ignorant. She knew female attorneys who were treated unfairly by, law firms because of their gender. Ruth appeared to accept the state of the legal profession at that time and felt that she could tolerate the differential treatment because she thought she would eventually earn the men's respect and admiration through her good work.

Consequently, rather than becoming angry at the attitudes and questions of interviewers, she accepted them as part of what she had to endure and dismissed them. When interviewers asked intrusive or inappropriate (now illegal) questions, she believed the interviewer "was doing his job" in looking for attorneys who would stay at the firm for the long term. In responding to these questions, Ruth would gloss over the answer and muse about the interviewer's manners. When asked if she had a boyfriend, and if not, how did she ever expect

to find one, she responded that "time will tell." She says now in jest that she never told them that she planned to marry and "have six children in close succession."

One story Ruth loves to relate occurred when she interviewed with an unnamed Boston law firm. As she tells it, after talking with several attorneys at the firm, she was escorted into a room with "five or six very old men" who proceeded to ask her "very personal questions." Among other things, she had to understand that "if we hired you, you will never meet a client because our clients would never understand a woman attorney." The men then became consumed with the issue of where she would eat lunch. Ruth describes it as like a tennis match. Back and forth: she couldn't eat with the married men because it would not look good, she couldn't eat with the unmarried men because something might "get started," and finally she couldn't eat with the women secretaries or paralegals because the demarcation between the lawyers and the staff was sacred. In observing this spectacle, she "wondered if [she] should offer not to eat." At the end of the interview, the old lawyers offered her a position. She later wrote them a courteous thank you note that withheld her opinion that they were "all nuts."

The Judge delighted in hearing stories from Ruth's interviews and he always tried to guess which attorneys said what. He "had a real hoot about this stuff." Following Judge Wilkins' counsel, Ruth's interviews ended when she interviewed at Ropes & Gray. He advised her to join Ropes & Gray because "there were more gentlemen at Ropes & Gray than at any other firm in the City."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in the fall of 1957 Ruth began working at 50 Federal Street in downtown Boston. Six attorneys started that year, two of whom were women. She started as a generalist, assigned to mainly corporate and litigation projects. Ruth always felt that she was treated in the same fashion as the men who started that year, even though she was told that she was earning less than her male counterparts with similar backgrounds. To be precise, the men starting that year earned a salary that was one thousand dollars greater than her salary. She accepted the terms without complaining because she thought, "Oh, that's the way it is.... I never felt like a second class citizen or rewarded less."

Despite the pay inequities, Ropes & Gray still treated the female associates well and the women "generally accepted things . . . because they were happy to be working as attorneys at all. . . [especially] at Ropes & Gray because of its professionalism, kindness, and honesty."<sup>8</sup> One Ropes & Gray partner, Charles Rugg, sent Ruth to New York to represent H. P. Hood at a conference of ice cream companies. When she expressed concern about the client's approval of her representation, Mr. Rugg said "Then to hell with them, let them get another lawyer."<sup>9</sup> Despite Mr. Rugg's endorsement of female attorneys, the legal profession still had not adapted to the new members of the Bar. The New York firm hosting the meeting, Dewey Ballantine, was one example. On her way into lunch at the firm's dining room, the maitre d' informed her that women were not permitted in the dining room. With a few volunteers, she ate at a small table in

the hall. She claims that "[a]t the time, all that didn't bother me a bit. I just thought it went with the job."<sup>10</sup>

After marrying Tom O'Brien, a doctor who specializes in immunology, Ruth moved to Texas with him for one year. She and Tom had met in the summer of 1950 and had communicated over eight years through letters because they were so rarely in the same place at the same time. When they returned from Texas she again worked at Ropes & Gray until she became pregnant in 1960. She had spent more than two years at Ropes & Gray working on a variety of assignments before she began having children. Her first child, Neil, was born in 1960 and she had four more children before returning to work at Ropes & Gray in 1971. Her children, in chronological order, are Neil, 1960, Luke, 1962, Conan, 1963, Kate, 1964, and Jane, 1967.

During this period she not only gave birth to and raised five children, but she was also involved in community matters in Brookline, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb. Moreover, for a brief period between her first and second children in 1961, she heeded the call of a law school classmate, Arnie Zack, and worked on the inception of the Peace Corps. The new president, John F. Kennedy, had established the Peace Corps and wanted a team of ten young attorneys to spread across the country promoting the new program and recruiting volunteers. Ruth "parked" her baby with her parents or Tom's parents and went on these "barn storming tours" which involved "meeting with students and faculty and the local press" on northeastern university campuses. It was a "wonderful time to work because it was all new and not fully organized . . . I didn't have to go through a lot of levels of bureaucracy." Her involvement with the fledgling program came to a halt when her second child was born seventeen months later in 1962.

In her eleven years away from the practice of law, Ruth was not "chafing at the bit," instead she enjoyed herself. "I like[d] to cook and do housework ... I liked having babies and liked taking care of them ... I always was very content." At the local level, she served on a multitude of committees and led the parent organizations at her children's schools. Additionally, she raised funds for and interviewed applicants to Vassar. Looking back on it, she describes some of the nicest times as spending afternoons in her friend Joyce's side yard where the children would play and the women would gather and drink iced tea. She affectionately referred to these afternoons as times when she and her friends were "stirring up lots of trouble."

### The Biggest Challenge of Ruth's Life

When asked to name the biggest challenge in her life, Ruth immediately described the difficulty of returning to work at Ropes & Gray in 1971. She had not

read a case in eleven years and was in the middle of raising five kids. In speaking with a group of professional women more than twenty-five years later, Ruth described the challenge of balancing a family with a career. She believes that any woman with children,<sup>11</sup> regardless of her profession, must "start out saying that she has a child" and then must decide "how much [she] is willing or can give to this job." The mother must determine "what [she] is willing to give it, what [she] will give it, what [is] negotiable" and then she must be very honest with her employer by explaining what to expect from her. Once the employer and mother have arrived at an agreement, the woman must then deliver on what she promised. Ruth readily admits that it was hard at times to fulfill her responsibilities and prioritize her family first. She frequently had more to do than time to do it.

Ruth was buying a Father's Day present in the late spring of 1971 when she ran into Ernie Sargent, a Ropes & Gray partner. She told him that although it would be hard, she thought it was time to "get the wheels greased again" and that she planned to attend Harvard Law School to earn an advanced degree. Ernie Sargent was the hiring partner at that time and he later called Ruth to discuss the possibility of Ruth returning to work at Ropes & Gray. She warned him that she was out of practice and had planned to return to Harvard Law School to catch up. He responded that whenever she returned she would have to re-learn the practice of law and that now was just as good as later. She then stated that she had children, five of them, and that she would have restrictions.

Ruth O'Brien and Ernie Sargent then sat down to negotiate the terms of her return to Ropes & Gray. Ruth understood that the practice of law often required attorneys to work late into the night, to work on weekends and to travel to other cities and states for clients. She also understood that, as the mother of five young children with a husband who frequently traveled for work, she simply could not tolerate this type of schedule. She then stated her restrictions: she was the mother of five children, the youngest of whom had just started nursery school; she had to be home for supper every night; she could not travel; she could not work late nights or on the weekends; and she had to donate one morning every week to her child's nursery school. Essentially, she was a mom first and an attorney second. She would do her work and she would do it well, but she would not participate in any side activities such as firm governance, scholarship or soliciting clients. Ernie agreed to her terms and asked her to join the real estate department where she could more easily control her schedule. Ruth indicated that she would accept the offer as long as she could leave the real estate department after her children were raised since property was her least favorite class in law school. Years later when her children were grown, Ruth turned down an offer to switch departments. Once she mastered the subject, she found it more interesting because her years of experience allowed her to work on problems that research alone could not resolve.

On October 5, 1971, Ruth O'Brien made her way to the Ropes & Gray offices at 225 Franklin Street to start one of the toughest assignments of her life. In her absence the firm had moved to new and tonier quarters. The firm had finally made the effort to ensure that the "upholstery matched the rugs." Additionally, the firm had grown to a size of one hundred and twenty five attorneys, approximately ten of whom were women. In describing this period, Ruth says it was one of the "hardest things" in her life. Although she had only worked approximately two years at Ropes & Gray before she had children she had developed a reputation for good work and reliability. "I wanted everyone to think I was reliable and did good work, but I had forgotten everything. So I was playing above my head for a couple of years."

The real estate department at that point consisted of one attorney, Marilyn Sullivan, because the partner heading up the department, Dick Johnson, had just been hospitalized. Ruth, at first, sat in his office and answered his phones. When clients called, Ruth, only vaguely familiar with the terms and doctrines of property law, would respond that she was a new attorney, that she had someone with her and that she would get back to the client with an answer. Then she would rush off to look up the terms in Blacks Law Dictionary, read the client's file and ascertain the applicable law. Additionally, she would meet with Marilyn Sullivan every day at ten o'clock in the morning. Marilyn had worked in the real estate department for years and she would "program [Ruth] for the day at hand."<sup>12</sup> Marilyn was a wonderful teacher and guided Ruth through this hard time.

Ruth officially began working two and one half days each week, but within a few months, she was working three days a week. Ruth found that reentry required a lot of hard work and discipline. She often brought home legal toms and, after the kids were tucked into bed, she would read them and try to understand the law. Additionally, she fought her fear by believing that people would not know she was scared unless she told them. In early 1973, Ruth faced a test of her will to work immediately after she had given birth to her sixth and last child, Justin. Ruth was ill with this pregnancy and had planned on taking time off to recover. Yet while convalescing at home, Ruth received a call from Dick Johnson who asked her to return to work as soon as possible to take care of over one hundred and forty appellate tax cases that were sitting in boxes on the floor of Marilyn's office. Unfortunately for the department, Marilyn Sullivan's departure to become a judge on the Massachusetts Land Court had coincided with Justin's birth. Ruth "nearly went through the floor" and protested that she wasn't sure she was able to perform the job. When he responded that "the answers are all in the books," she didn't even know which books he meant. She gathered her courage, hid her fear and returned to work, "I didn't know what he was talking about but that I better figure it out fast if I was going to last."

In looking back on her career, Ruth always states that she could not have done it without the support and cooperation of her children and husband. When she returned to work, Ruth wanted her children to feel secure in knowing that they

could always reach her and that she could be home within twenty minutes to help them. To this end, she gave every child several dimes and a copy of her work phone number. Moreover, she gave strict instructions to her colleagues and assistants that they were to interrupt her whenever her children called, regardless of what she was doing. Her assistant of almost twenty five years, Mary Varricchio, says that Ruth's children "would always call if they needed her" and that she herself served as "a home base for all [Ruth's] children." Several times in Ruth's tenure at Ropes & Gray, she had to leave the office immediately because a child was sick or had injured him or herself. She would find other attorneys to cover her at meetings or closings and promised to return the favor in the future. Sometimes, to meet the demands of her clients, Ruth would return to the office after spending the day with her injured child and complete a few hours of work. She felt that any professional would be forced to take care of his or her work even during family emergencies.

Ruth describes her husband, Tom, as "an absolute jewel," in part because he was "always supportive" of her career. As a doctor, he too was busy and often traveled around the world teaching people how to fight disease. Before her return to Ropes & Gray, he encouraged her to "do what [she] want[s] and that he would help [her] however he could." He urged her to work again if it made her happy, not because they had tuition bills pending. In fact, in the beginning, her part-time salary at Ropes & Gray did not cover the cost of the help they hired to care for the children. If she came home from work upset and scared, "Tom always took time to listen, to calm me down to help me laugh about it all."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Tom became more involved with raising the children. He would drive in carpools, attend teacher conferences and cook dinner. In fact, he compared preparing meals to working in a research laboratory. When Ruth injured her back and Tom took over some of her household duties, he chastised her, "I don't know what you were trying to prove .... I didn't realize how busy you were, now I'll help out more." Finally, their parents supported Ruth's return to Ropes & Gray. In particular, Tom's father, a banker, thought she should go back to work because he feared she would become bored when the children grew up if she did not have her own pursuits.

In order to manage a large household where both parents worked, they "organized for [her] working." To take care of the children, they hired a Canadian farm woman who was also responsible for light housekeeping. Ruth understood even then that "my work reputation is only as good as my babysitter is reliable." Additionally, to coordinate the children's lives, they wrote everyone's daily schedules on a blackboard in the kitchen. Tom and Ruth also agreed that instead of maintaining their busy social life, they would spend their extra time with the children. Ruth had loved to cook and entertain, but she knew that she would not have the time or energy to keep up the same pace. Years later one of her great joys in retirement is reconnecting with all the friends she has been too busy to see. Finally, Ruth often sent her children in her place on the many trips her

husband took because she did not have the time to travel with him. Instead she remained in Boston and helped her clients with their legal problems.

### Ruth's Successful Tenure at Ropes & Gray

The tax appeal cases that Dick Johnson so unceremoniously dumped on Ruth in 1973 became one of the mainstays of her work at Ropes & Gray for the next twenty-five years. She became so familiar with the work that she can now "quote from the statute books," the books that at first overwhelmed her. Under her watch, she extended the real estate department's involvement in these cases by attending and presenting the clients' cases at administrative hearings. Instead of asking a litigator to take over, Ruth wanted to handle the case because she knew the law, the client and the property. Additionally, Ruth worked on general real estate cases that did not involve commercial clients, including land registration cases, zoning and planning problems and estate plans that involved conveying property to nonprofit conservation organizations in exchange for tax benefits. On the pro bono side, Ruth has never been without a client. Over the years, she has done a lot of work for the Sherrill House, a nursing home sponsored by Trinity Church and Copley Square, and other individual members of the local community.

After working part time for six years, Ruth, under increased client load, began working full time in 1977. Of course, throughout the entire period she was working part time, she consistently spent more time than she billed researching and learning the law. In the summer of 1978, one year later, Ruth became the second woman and the first Yale Law School graduate to be elected to the Ropes & Gray partnership.<sup>14</sup> Ruth was surprised to make partner, even if her assistant was not. Mary Varricchio said, "I was not surprised because she worked very hard and she was very gifted and bright." In fact, if all the time she spent at Ropes & Gray between 1957 and 1978 was summed up, she had barely satisfied Ropes & Gray's nine year partnership track.

One reason Ruth did not expect to make partner was, no doubt, due to the fact that only one other woman, out of many qualified candidates, had ever made partner in Ropes & Gray's history. In fact, the first woman elected to partnership was Joan Fuller, an attorney in the trusts and estates department, and that was in 1973.<sup>15</sup> According to Ruth, during the 1970s, the firm's senior partners realized that the firm had to begin selecting women for partnership to attract and retain bright female attorneys. More women interviewing with the firm were asking about their prospects for partnership. It was a "new way of looking at things" and for Ropes & Gray to remain competitive, they had to treat women equally. In 1978, Ruth and Joan began the tradition of an annual luncheon for the firm's female partners. Over the years it has gone from a gathering of two women to almost twenty women.

Many of the "old timers" had opposed including women as partners even though women had worked as attorneys at Ropes & Gray for many years. The first two female attorneys at Ropes & Gray, Mary Lellan and Blanche Quaid, began working as secretaries in the probate department in the 1930's. Before World War Two these two women attended law school at night and passed the bar. It took the lack of manpower during World War Two, however, to convince the other attorneys to recognize them as full fledged lawyers. While Mary Lellan retired in the 1960s, Ruth had the good fortune to work and become friends with Blanche Ouaid. Ruth thought Blanche "knew everything" and was an "excellent" attorney. Even though Blanche worked beyond the normal retirement age, she was never promoted to partner. According to Ruth, Blanche does not worry much about her title as long as Ropes & Gray sends her a check every week.

Unfortunately, women had difficulty making partner at Boston law firms into the 1970s. One female attorney in Boston was reportedly denied partnership in the early 1970s because she was considered "bristly" and "she would get her back up about things." Despite the fact that there were many male partners who met or exceeded that description, it was not an acceptable quality in a woman. This woman was judged more critically than her male counterparts. Thankfully, Ruth believes that many women in Boston now make partner even if they are not "Pollyanna's" or "Little Miss Sunshine's."

Another reason Ruth was shocked to make partner was because she had never asked her superiors at Ropes & Gray about her partnership chances. The training she had received from her mother about politeness prevented her from asserting herself and asking about the indecent subject of a promotion. In retrospect, Ruth believes her unwillingness to inquire about her prospects for partnership was "silly." "All the politeness training I received at my mother's knee ... doesn't belong in the workplace."

Although Ruth lived in the dark about her partnership prospects, Ruth suggests that sometimes it was easier for women to accomplish what they wanted if they were less aggressive or "shrill." While she agrees with her old professor, Helen Lockwood, that women should have "equal opportunity to go for the jobs that were equally [theirs]," she's "more comfortable going about it with [her] mother's manner ... it's possible to get your goals recognized without being totally disagreeable." In other words, she has "incorporated the two styles" of Helen Lockwood and her mother. In contrast, Ruth believes that some women are not able to achieve what they want because they tend to irritate and therefore distance men with their forceful and direct behavior. As she recognized, "men will accept shrillness from other men, but not from women." She commends women who have "quite pleasantly stated their aims and have had them recognized and have emerged with respect by all involved without having irritated anyone." The key, Ruth believes, is to "argue, but in a nice way."

Just as Ruth maintains a certain decorum in her professional dealings, she expects other people to treat her well also. At one meeting where the opposing counsel had gone "beyond the bounds of a polite exchange," Ruth said, "Excuse me for a minute, gentlemen, I have said I would treat you with the utmost courtesy, but I require to be treated in the same way, . . . I do not allow people to speak to me this way. If you wish to reschedule this meeting with tones I require, then I would be glad to return. In the meantime, I'm leaving." She then stood up and left the room. Within the next hour, the senior managing partner of the law firm that employed the offending lawyer came with "hat in hand" to apologize to her. Similarly, in heated exchanges with clients, Ruth employed her motherly skills to defuse situations. She would say, "You're having a bad day and you're unduly emotional. As we speak, I'm afraid I'm losing respect for you. I would like to talk to you early tomorrow." Mary Varricchio agreed in that she "never saw Ruth come up against a person she could not deal with.... She just had this knack of adjusting to a person's needs or personality ... [and] ... her clients responded very well."

In the midst of making partner and handling an increased client load, Ruth continued to always prioritize her children and family first. Mary Varricchio collaborated that "[Ruth's] children and family always came first. That was the rule." While Ruth seems more comfortable describing the situation with humor, "actually, I came to work at Ropes & Gray in order to rest up,"<sup>16</sup> she will admit that "running a large family and a career at Ropes & Gray was not a snap."<sup>17</sup> Ruth, in dedicating herself to a thriving legal career and raising a large family, survived by working extremely hard. After some prodding, Ruth described herself as a "person in perpetual motion" who thought she had to be the "one-woman rescue squad" and never sought out help from others. She always expected the most from herself in all situations and at all times. She believes that "what a person can accomplish is limitless if [he or she is] sensible and organized."

Even when Ruth seriously injured her back in the late 1970s and spent the next eleven years of her life enduring eight operations and extended periods in body casts, she continued to work and serve her clients at Ropes & Gray. Her assistant recalled cabbing out to Ruth's home in Brookline and Ruth would "dictate letters and memos and directions" and "do phone work from home." Ruth "kept most of her clients and we just worked from her home." Mary's impression was that Ruth thought "it was something she had to deal with as quietly and efficiently as she could.... She always seemed to be resilient." It's clear that Ruth always did what was needed and consequently never focused much on herself. In reflecting on her busy life, she praises younger women who take care of themselves. She hopes that her daughters "will stop a little more than I did."

Ruth believes that she was a good attorney, without respect to gender. She always completed her work in a thorough manner and on time. "Nobody ever suffered because I had a family. I delivered whatever was required. She worried, though, that clients would suspect that she could not handle their legal problems

and raise a large family at the same time. Since she believed that "no client wants to hear about children," she would simply report in general terms that "an emergency has arisen" if her children called and needed her. Her assistant was instructed "to say that there was an emergency that was out of the office and that she would be back . . . nothing about the children." In these situations, clients most likely thought she had to attend to another client. She recalled one time when a client noticed a picture of her six children in her office and asked, in shock, whether all those children belonged to her. Ruth never answered him because she feared that he felt "uncomfortable with his discovery" and would "probably wonder how [she] can pay attention to his serious problems if [she] had all those kids to take care of." The client did not pursue the matter.

In committing herself to her family and her clients' problems, Ruth found she had little time for other pursuits. She stuck to her negotiated agreement with Ernie Sargent and never participated in maintaining client relations or firm governance. Similarly, although she believed in women's causes and movements, she never became involved with or worked to advance these movements in the public sphere. She felt that her time was more wisely spent on her family and work.

" There were a lot of women's rights and entitlements that I would have loved to participate in, but I didn't have the time. I had to be very disciplined about what I would do and how I would spend my time.... I could not get involved because I would be using time that I dedicated to my family."

Ruth's secretary commented that women's rights "were not that important to [Ruth] as an individual because she knew the type of person she was and she did her work and she did it very very well." Ruth recalled one woman she knew who had spent a lot her time working on these movements and "her marriage did fail and she was always complaining about trouble with her children." Ruth believes that you "can't do it all."

Even though Ruth refused to take time away from her family to become involved in large scale movements, she did spend a lot of time helping younger people, attorneys and staff members, at Ropes & Gray with their problems. She was able to have an impact on an individual level. As a senior female partner at the firm, people often came to her when they were concerned about discrimination or unfairness at Ropes & Gray. She always took the time to listen, even if it was after work and cut into her time with her family. She always said, "You can talk to me about anything, I'll do whatever I can to help." Despite Ruth's predilection to work on "an one-by-one basis," the firm recruited her to sit on its Affirmative Action Committee that has, over the years, intensified its efforts to sensitize members of the firm to rights of women, minorities and the disabled. She believes that the "firm has become more organized and aggressive about moving out wrongs and correcting them.

## Conclusion

Ruth O'Brien is an amazing person. She has lived her life to the fullest and has tried her best to enjoy every last moment of it. Her family always planned a central role in her happiness. She has spent much her time in retirement visiting her children across the country and traveling with her husband. Moreover, the law, despite the dearth of women in the field at the beginning of her career, suited her well. "I have absolutely loved the practice of law." Ropes & Gray turned out to be the best place for her to practice. She holds the firm in the highest regard, "I can't think of any other firm that would have given me the power to choose."

While she has overcome more prejudices and achieved more in her life than most, she has remained a grateful and appreciative person. At the beginning of her retirement speech at Ropes & Gray's partnership meeting, Ruth expressed her gratitude, "Hillary Clinton says that it takes a village, but when I think of all those people who are responsible for my standing in front of you right now, I realize that for me, it has taken a whole state approximately the size of New York." Additionally, she has worked and worked to ensure that she never disappoints herself or others. Yet, even with her high expectations, she has never forgotten the importance of humor and the necessity of laughing at oneself. Mary Varricchio claimed that "no matter how serious the work would be, she had this ability to look for the humor and that made the work a lot lighter." Mary continued to describe Ruth as

" a very wonderful person, very receptive, very generous person to work with. She cared a lot about people in general and it did not matter if you were a prince or a pauper, she has one code of values which apply to everyone then and now. She's a very bright person, very gifted and very hardworking - but she enjoys helping so much that it did not seem like work to her... her caring would spill over, so I became caring also."

When asked to name her heroes, Ruth defined them as people for whom she has "immeasurable respect." Rather than revering those who are particularly larger than life, she esteems those who "are honest, competent and reliable." Not surprisingly, the heroes in Ruth's life are those who influenced her professional life. She enjoyed working with these men and women and their impact on her was large. Specifically, she cited Judge Wilkins for his infectious enthusiasm for the law, Dick Johnson, who headed the real estate department and refused to spoon feed the law to her, John Pike, her friend and colleague who believes so strongly in the importance of justice, and finally, Mary Varricchio because she always gave a first class performance regardless of whether she was hurting.

At the age of sixty-five, Ruth O'Brien retired last December from Ropes & Gray. "I am sad that she's gone. I will miss her very much. Her caring made her great," lamented Mary Varricchio. Ruth plans to spend the first half of 1997 visiting her

children, traveling with her husband, socializing with her friends and simply enjoying herself. In the fall, she will fulfill her promise to Dorothy Day by volunteering at Greater Boston Legal Services with her old colleague and the former Managing Partner of Ropes & Gray, Archie Southgate. She hopes to use her experience in elder law and housing law to help people in the local Boston community.

### The Future of this Biography

My resources for this biography were four lengthy interviews of Ruth O'Brien, one interview of her secretary, Mary Varricchio, a copy of an autobiographical speech that Ruth gave to Ropes & Gray's partners when she retired, a book detailing the history of Ropes & Gray, and the Yale Law School alumni magazine. The few newspaper articles that I found were all about her son, Conan O'Brien, host of a late night TV show, and only mentioned her in passing.

To flush out this biography, I think the best leads would include more interviews of Ruth, her family, her colleagues, and her clients. She is one of the most humble people I have ever met and I suspect that I would learn more about her accomplishments through other people. I would also like to talk with her children about how Ruth managed a career and raising six children. Now that her children are grown, they probably have more perspective on what their mother accomplished. I would be particularly interested to hear from her two daughters once they become mothers. Her husband, Tom O'Brien, would also provide an interesting perspective. While they seem to have a very close relationship, she did not talk about him much in our interviews. This was probably because she thought I wanted to hear most about her career. In addition to interviewing her family members, other good sources would include her Ropes & Gray colleagues, Marilyn Sullivan, Blanche Quaid, John Pike, Joan Fuller, and Arthur Hughes, her law school friend, Arnie Zack, and some of her clients such as Alice Boelter.

Additionally, I would suggest visiting Vassar College and Yale Law School to sift through old records, provided that I received Ruth's permission. Examining her school applications, transcripts and memorabilia from her time at these universities would be informative. Along the same vein, I would love to learn more about Helen Lockwood, the dynamic woman professor at Vassar. I would also contact the New York State Bar Association because the study she conducted for Dutchess County may still reside in the Association's archives. To add more historical background to the biography, I might include more general information about the status of women in law firms across the United States. This would simply emphasize the magnitude of her accomplishments. Finally, her biographer may want to learn more about the history of Irish Catholics in the United States and Massachusetts in particular. Learning more about the life and influence of Dorothy Day would tie into this research.

---

Bibliography

1. Carl M. Brauer, *Ropes & Gray 1865-1990* (1991).
2. *lexcetca*, YALE LAW REPORT, 1956.
3. Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Address at Annual Ropes & Gray Partnership Luncheon (Dec. 20, 1996).
4. Telephone Interviews with Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Partner Rope & Gray (Mar. 11, Mar. 14, Apr. 22, & May 7, 1997).
- 5.. Telephone Interview with Mary Roche Varricchio, assistant to Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Ropes & Gray (Apr. 2, 1997).

---

Endnotes

- 1 Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Address at Annual Ropes & Gray Partnership Luncheon (Dec. 20, 1996) at 2.
- 2 *Id.*
- 3 *Id.*
- 4 *Id.*
- 5 *lexcetera*, YALE LAW REPORT, 1956, at 2.
- 6 Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Address at Annual Ropes & Gray Partnership Luncheon (Dec. 20, 1996) at 4.
- 7 *Id.*
- 8 CARL M. BRAUER, *ROPES & GRAY 1865-1990*, at 81(1991) (describing the general sentiment of the early women attorneys at Ropes & Gray).
- 9 *Id.* at 82.
- 10 Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Address at Annual Ropes & Gray Partnership Luncheon (Dec. 20, 1996) at 5.

11 Even though fathers are responsible for the child rearing in some families, Ruth believes it is most often the mother's role.

12 Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Address at Annual Ropes & Gray Partnership Luncheon (Dec. 20, 1996) at 5.

13 *Id.* at 6.

14 CARL M. BRAUER, ROPES & GRAY 1865-1990, at 130 (1991).

15 *Id.* at 170.

16 Ruth Reardon O'Brien, Address at Annual Ropes & Gray Partnership Luncheon (Dec. 20, 1996) at 7.

17 *Id.* at 6.