Renovation of the Law School's glass curtain wall
Alumni Profile

Courage, Patience, and Driving Energy: A Portrait of Ruth Weyand

"All men are created equal. . . ." Ruth Weyand (J.D. '32) has spent a lifetime fighting to have all men and women treated equally. Labor and race relations are her causes and she has fought to improve them through the courts since 1933, when she first began practicing law.

Now the Equal Pay Act counsel for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, she is at the peak of a successful career. But Ms. Weyand has herself met prejudice and discrimination along her way, starting with her entry to the Law School in 1929. She described her efforts to be admitted.

"In those days there were no advance applications for admission, no pre-admission exams, none of the steps which now must be taken to get admitted. The procedure was to arrive on registration day with transcript from an accredited college in hand. I arrived with duly certified transcripts of courses taken at the University of Minnesota, William Jewell College, and Louisiana Polytechnic Institute, all then fully accredited institutions.

The personnel at the Law School table [in the field house where all the schools registered] told me that the faculty did not want young women in the Law School because they wasted the professors' time, that the faculty regarded young women as coming to the Law School to get husbands and not as serious students. There was no suggestion that I lacked any qualification except male sex. Someone at the table showed an awareness of the high caliber of my college record by telling me I should not ruin my good academic record by flunking out of law school. It was suggested that I attend the School of Social Service Administration which was registering at a nearby table."

When she registered with the SSA she was told that the Law School had agreed to let Social Service students have a certain number of law school slots. So she signed up for all the courses that entering law students took: contracts, personal property, common law pleading, and torts. "No one questioned my presence in the classes. I participated actively in classroom discussions."

She took examinations and got grades with no further challenges and ended the first quarter with the highest
average in the class. There were no further objections to her status. She registered as a law student in subsequent quarters, and finally graduated with honors.

Discrimination again followed her in a search for a job, as doors that were opened to similarly qualified men were slammed in her face. With the help of the Dean of the Law School, Harry A. Bigelow, she found employment with the firm of Gardner & Carton in Chicago, but the firm kept her under wraps and did not admit to clients that a woman was working on their cases. Briefs she submitted with her name “Ruth Weyand” on them kept coming back “R. Weyand.” Clients who accidentally saw her were told that she was just a messenger to take briefs over to the court. At that time women were never let into court, anyway.

In 1938 Ms. Weyand joined the National Labor Relations Board. Always an advocate for the underdog, she had a nine-for-nine winning record in oral argument before the U.S. Supreme Court in such landmark cases as Medco Photo Supply v. NLRB, 321 U.S. 678 (1944), in which the Court first recognized that a union designated by a majority of workers speaks for the whole bargaining unit.

Ms. Weyand worked as a volunteer with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from 1939 to 1965. From 1945 onwards she was a formal member of the Association’s national legal committee. She helped write the brief for the plaintiffs in Shelley v. Kraemer, 334 U.S. 1 (1948).

In 1947 Ms. Weyand defied the conventions of her day and married a black man, Leslie Perry, a lawyer who was head of the NAACP’s Washington bureau. The marriage was kept secret for three years. Within months of its becoming public, in 1950, her house was set on fire, with her small son inside it. Friends and neighbors helped put out the fire and no one was hurt. Ms. Weyand had wanted to call the fire department but was told it was a waste of time as all the firemen were white and would not bother to put out fires at any black person’s home. She was shocked at the realization that black people did not have access to the services that whites took for granted. Over the past thirty years fire and police departments have gradually become integrated. Ms. Weyand sees this not only in terms of providing jobs but also in providing protection to blacks.

When it became known she had married a black, Ms. Weyand was also asked to leave the NLRB, although she had risen to the position of assistant general counsel in charge of U.S. Supreme Court litigation.

After leaving the NLRB Ms. Weyand entered the Washington law offices of Chicago’s Clifford D. O’Brien and later joined the International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers as associate general counsel. Here she suffered her only defeat in a case argued before the Supreme Court, which reversed a decision in a lower court and held that a company did not discriminate because of sex when it offered temporary benefits for all disabilities except those related to pregnancy (Gilbert v. General Electric, 429 U.S. 125 [1976]). Ms. Weyand and her colleagues took their defeat as a challenge and drafted a bill proposal to amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Within two years the amendment was adopted by Congress.

Ms. Weyand’s latest victory is the EEOC’s action against the Teachers’ Insurance and Annuity Association, in which she and other counsel argued successfully that under Title VII gender-based actuarial tables could not be used to justify lower monthly annuity payments to women.

In spite of so much personal experience of injustice in her life, Ruth Weyand has not seen herself as a crusader to right the wrongs of individuals. She says that she sublimates her anger at individual injustice and attacks the social conditions underlying the injustice. She chose the fields of labor and race relations deliberately because she believes the type of law developed in these areas is crucial to the building of an orderly and humane society. Ms. Weyand modestly disclaims personal glory in the cases she has argued and credits her success to teamwork: the creation of a network of knowledgeable lawyers and related experts for each issue, who together work out the cases to be filed, the positions to be taken, and the goals to be reached.

Today Ruth Weyand shows no signs of slowing down her active life. Every morning she is up at dawn and runs for half an hour along the Chesapeake Bay beach with her two dogs. If the weather permits, she plunges into the water and swims a mile up the bay and back again, as she has done for the past forty years. “I have never worked harder in my life,” she says of her job at the EEOC. And yet, looking back on her life, Ruth Weyand says that she never worked. “It was all a great adventure—the call of the wild. Just as before World War II I gloried in renting a 45-horse power Piper Cub, climbing to 10,000 feet and doing aerobatics, and still feel physical rapture in swimming in waves much too rough for common sense, so too I am having a great and glorious adventure in the wilds of human relations—the uncivilized sector within our own borders.” For fifty years she has fought social injustice. And she is ready to meet the next fifty.