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Joan M. Hall: A woman of firsts

By Karen Shoffner

Joan M. Hall's retirement from Jenner & Block in 1999 didn't mean her career was ending, it simply meant the beginning of a new chapter.

By the time she retired, Hall had racked up a number of accomplishments. She was the second woman hired by the firm, and the first woman to serve on its executive committee. Over the past decade, Hall, 70, has been a driving force behind the Young Women's Leadership Charter School of Chicago. One colleague and admirer called Hall "indispens-

able" when it comes to the school.

She's the type of person who doesn't look at obstacles or boundaries and turn the other direction. She instead meets each challenge head-on and becomes, often, the first to conquer that challenge and thus paves the way for the next group.

Anyone familiar with her background may not have predicted that she'd have a successful law practice in a large city.

Hall grew up with an older sister and younger brother, in Bassett, Neb., a small

town near the South Dakota border in an area called the Sand Hills. She said she still misses the quiet she knew growing up.

"In the city, you are never away from noise, no matter where you are," she said. "In this little town, at night, for example, the only noise was the whistle of a train that came through at 9 p.m."

In high school, she kept busy with four jobs. She gave piano lessons, played the organ in church and for weddings and funerals, worked in a dry goods store, and wrote a

newspaper column for a local paper.

Her parents were schoolteachers. Her aunts, uncles, and grandparents were farmers and ranchers.

So, with no lawyers in her family, how did she become a lawyer?

After getting a bachelor's degree from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1961, Hall headed to Rutgers University in New Jersey to begin graduate work in sociology. But it wasn't a good fit.

"The truth of the matter is, I was dating someone at the time who had always known he wanted to be a lawyer," Hall said. "I was not happy with my graduate program. ... So he suggested that I apply to law school. I said I had nothing better to do, so I completed one semester at Rutgers in sociology and then I applied for law school."

She applied to five law schools, including Yale, and was accepted at all of them. She enrolled at Yale, without having seen it, because it offered her the most money.

The school gave her a scholarship and living expenses for the first year, and she borrowed for the last two years.

She was one of seven women in the law school's class of 1965. Hall said that's the same number of women who were in Yale law school's class of 1924 ó not much had changed in 41 years.

Nonetheless, Hall said she never felt any hostility from classmates or professors. But when it came time to look for a job, again, not much had changed in 41 years.

In those days, many firms called the law school's placement office and said they didn't hire women, so it shouldn't sign up any women for interviews with their firms.

Hall took a practical approach to this state of affairs.

"You know, it was before I had any consciousness of women's issues. And, you know, we didn't protest. We didn't complain," she said. "We just signed up with the people that were willing to talk to us."

One of the firms willing to interview her was Jenner & Block. When the firm hired her in 1965, she was just the second woman hired as a lawyer by the firm.

The female attorney who was already there worked in trusts and estates, "which was an area of the law that was thought to be appropriate for women then," Hall said.

When Hall joined the firm, however, Jenner & Block did not put any restrictions on what kind of law she could practice. During her first five years, she worked almost exclusively with name partner Samuel W. Block, who, she said, was "a wonderful mentor."

Block's practice was a mixture of corporate and litigation, so that's what Hall did. However Block died unexpectedly at age 58.

"It was a great loss for the firm and for me," Hall said.

Building her practice

After that, she practiced commercial litigation, specializing in defending corporations in securities cases in federal court. Among her major clients were Kemper Financial Services and Illinois Tool Works.

"One of my great satisfactions in the practice of law was the developing of my own clients," she said. "I very much liked having people who relied on my judgment."

She also maintained a substantial pro bono practice, specializing in prison litigation. She and other lawyers worked on landmark class action litigation on behalf of inmates held in protective custody at Stateville Correctional Center, alleging that their conditions of confinement were cruel and unusual punishment.

Despite the lack of women in law, Hall said she didn't encounter much discrimination or bias in her early years of practice. She said she never felt that any of the firm's clients objected to having a woman working on their matters.

If they did, she said, she didn't know about it. Nor did she feel that judges discriminated against her.

But not all doors were open to her, or at least, not all front doors.

If clients wanted to meet at the Union League Club of Chicago, she needed to use a side door, as women did then. And, as a woman, she couldn't go to the Chicago Club, so clients had to make other arrangements in-

stead of meeting there. Ironically, she is now a Chicago Club member.

Many firsts

Hall said one of the more disconcerting things in her first 10 years of practice was that she encountered very few other female lawyers.

She achieved several firsts while at Jenner & Block. One of them is that she was the firm's first pregnant lawyer. She had her first child in 1970, and said it was very difficult to find clothes that were appropriate for a pregnant female lawyer. At that time, maternity leave was unheard of, so she took one week off for each child. Today, in addition to her two children, she has five stepchildren.

In 1976, she became the first female chair of the firm's hiring committee. Under her leadership, seven of the 16 associates hired by Jenner & Block that year were women.

By 1982, Hall was elected the first female chair of the American Bar Association Section of Litigation. She also served on the ABA's Federal Judiciary Committee, which screens all applicants for federal judgeships in the U.S. at the district court, circuit court, and U.S. Supreme Court levels.

She became the fourth woman elected as a fellow to the American College of Trial Lawyers.

While at Jenner & Block, Hall began holding informal luncheons with other female lawyers at the firm.

Sometimes, women working in professions such as law have noted that other women may not be supportive of each other, said Barbara Steiner, a litigation partner at Jenner & Block. That isn't the case at the firm, due to Hall, she said.

"She has always reached out and was supportive of women," Steiner said. "It was a very inclusive atmosphere that she fostered."

Susan Levy, now the managing partner at Jenner & Block, said those informal luncheons gave the firm's female attorneys the opportunity to support each other and share advice. Those luncheons were formalized into what is now called the Women's Forum.

Steiner has been with Jenner & Block since 1974, when half of the incoming first-year associates were female, she said. Steiner worked for Hall while in the firm's summer program in 1973, and as a newer associate.

"She was incredibly thorough and polite Ö," Steiner said. "She was decent and fair and smart and level-headed."

Steiner and Levy both are thankful for the hard work Hall put in at Jenner & Block.

"Women at Jenner never had to blaze trails or bust glass ceilings because Joan had already done it," said Levy, who joined the firm in 1982. "We never felt like second-class citizens here because Joan was a firm leader."

Working with education

Even before she retired from the firm 10 years ago, Hall was already working on her next big project.

In 1997, she started talking about a school that would eventually become the Young Women's Leadership Charter School (YWLCS), an all-girls school for grades 7 through 12.

Hall was among 23 women who made up the school's steering committee. They worked for two years finding a space for the school, raising money, creating the school's mission and vision, and devising a curriculum and budget.

They received a charter from the Chicago Board of Education in 1999.

Hall got involved in the school because of her belief that public education is vital to the city, and that some young women can benefit from being educated at an all-girls school.

"I think public education is really important; and if the City of Chicago does not have top-notch public education, we won't be turning out the kind of citizens who can hold down the jobs that need to be done to make Chicago a vibrant city," Hall said.

"I was also very interested in starting an all-girls public school. I had never gone to an all-girls school, but because of my own personal experience in the early days, I really have strong convictions about making opportunities available to women," she said. "And research indicates that for some young women, particularly economically

disadvantaged young women, they do better in a single-sex environment."

Hall doesn't believe that single-sex education is for everyone, "but single-sex education has always been an option for wealthy girls. And we wanted it to be an option for economically disadvantaged girls," she said.

The school opened Aug. 22, 2000, at 2641 S. Calumet Ave. It is about 78 percent African-American, 15 percent Latina, 6 percent Caucasian, 1 percent mixed race, and 1 percent Asian-American, according to the school's website.

Bette Cerf Hill is one of the women who have been involved with the school since the beginning. The artist and community activist first met Hall casually about 12 years ago. Shortly after that first meeting, Hall invited Hill to lunch with Ann Rubenstein Tisch of the Tisch Foundation. The lunch was about starting a public school for girls.

Hill, founder of the Printers Row Book Fair, remembers Hall being an interesting combination of serious and fun.

"She has this huge laugh," Hill said. "She can see the humor in things."

She added that Hall took on the "very unglamorous" legal issues that confronted the school early on, including a threat by the American Civil Liberties Union to sue because the school was going to be single-sex.

"She takes on the hardest jobs for herself," said Hill, who is also a founding board member of YWLCS, treasurer, and chair of the budget and finance committee of the school.

"If there's one person that has been indispensable to the school from the beginning to today it's Joan," she said.

"It probably wouldn't have existed without her. Starting a charter school is sort of like pushing a heavy object up a hill. She's been the major pusher."

Helen Doria, formerly executive director of Millennium Park, met Hall through Hill. Doria said she and Hill would brainstorm about partnerships that would help the school. About five years ago, Hill invited Doria to lunch to meet Hall.

"She's elegant. She's intelligent. She had a kind of calm about her and strength," Doria

said about Hall.

"She's this tremendous leader. There's also this tremendous warmth. That was all there in this first meeting."

Looking back on that lunch date, Doria said, "It was a set-up."

Hall and Hill convinced her to get involved with the school, and Doria is now a board member, and chair of the board's development committee.

Glen Spear, senior vice president and counsel for Pritzker Realty Group, became acquainted with the school and Hall about five years ago ó thanks to his boss Penny Pritzker, a founding board member of the school.

Spear said Pritzker had been on the finance committee and was getting ready to leave it.

"[Hall] really knew how I could help the school," said Spear, a member of the school board, and treasurer and chair of the budget and finance committee.

"She brought me in, in a way that made me feel comfortable. She really coordinated my introduction and involvement with the school so that it was a good fit."

Hill said Hall is one of those rare people who follow through on their promises. Doria echoed that sentiment.

"She's a woman of great vision and she takes that vision and makes it happen," Doria said. "She's got the resiliency and the intelligence to move it into reality. She has the heart to make people come work with her. She's also humble. She'll move away from the praise. She'll spread it around."

Hall is immediate past president of the school board, but is still very much involved.

"One challenge is that the girls come to us very under-prepared academically, so there's a lot of work to be done on that front," Hall said. "What I've concluded is, we have to do three things.

"We have to teach them to believe in themselves, because frequently they're very lacking in self-confidence. They have to learn the value of hard work, because they may have come from an environment where hard work is not especially valued. And third, we have to raise their academic achievement to a level where they can go to college, persevere,

and graduate.”

She said she worries about the girls once they leave the nurturing environment of the charter school.

“We worry about them all the time, but we try and keep in close touch with the girls,” Hall said.

“They have lots of challenges. It’s a challenge to be in a small minority in a school. There are financial challenges. There are frequently family issues at home. So it’s all one big challenge.”

An active life

In addition to the school, Hall is also active

in Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, and is on the executive committee and the board of trustees at Rush University Medical Center. She chairs the medical center’s quality of care committee.

Hall received the Women’s Bar Association of Illinois’ Woman with Vision award in 2002, which honors women who have demonstrated visionary approaches in their careers and have contributed to the empowerment of women in law.

And she was honored in April at Girl Power, a benefit luncheon for the school.

When people talk about Hall, they mention her intelligence, thoroughness, determi-

nation, and hard work. Those are qualities she honed early in her career as that rare creature in law firms of the 1960s and early 1970s: a female attorney.

“My approach was, I was always extremely well-prepared in anything I did,” Hall said. “I went into every situation expecting to be evaluated on my ability, not my gender. And I really didn’t spend any time being bitter about what wasn’t available to me because, in fact, there were many things that came my way because there came a time when people realized they needed to include women in what they were doing. So I was frequently the beneficiary of that.” ■