

“Our First Lady Member”

Based on an interview of Sally Merchak by Alissa N. Hudson in September 2014

Sally Merchak was born in Washington, DC and grew up in Annandale, Virginia. She was among the first women to attend UVA after women were granted admission in the fall of 1970. She actually transferred there, having started at Mary Washington College in 1969. She graduated in 1973 with a degree in Government / Foreign Affairs and recalled there were 70 women in her graduating class of approximately 800 students. She graduated from George Washington University School of Law in 1977. When asked why she wanted to pursue a career in law, she said it was partly because her father was a police officer in Fairfax County and she loved hearing the stories he told about work, about being in court, and talking with the prosecutors. “But what really cemented it for me was my mother telling me that girls couldn’t be lawyers.”

While in law school, Merchak interned in small firm, large firm and government law environments, trying to determine what type of practice she would like to pursue. Her favorite experience was with Sharon Lieblich, who ran a small family law practice in Alexandria. Sally, “just loved the whole atmosphere in her office” and learned the basics of family law while there. Ultimately, she decided to open her own practice with classmate Phil O’Brien. They looked for areas where there was rapid growth and comparably few attorneys, which lead them to eastern Prince William County. Among those practicing there at the time were Pat Molinari, Mike Quigley, Dick Nageotte, Lacey Compton, Jr., Doug Bergere and John Gullette. In 1977, Merchak and O’Brien had the good fortune to meet Earl Wagner, an older attorney whose practice was in Woodbridge, and who was ready to retire. He gave the entire practice to them. Everything. Clients, furniture, equipment, books. All of it. They worked together for about a year, and when Wagner retired and O’Brien took another job, Merchak became a solo practitioner.

Her mentor, without a doubt, was Pat Molinari. She described him as so welcoming, not just to her, but to everyone. She met him in court one day and discovered that his office was just around the corner from hers. Molinari exposed her to real estate work, explaining that there weren’t enough settlement attorneys in the area to handle the needs of the growing community. Sally didn’t know how to do real estate work, so Pat invited her over to his office showed her how, introduced her to area realtors, and soon she was handling closings in addition to court appointed work and family law. Pat’s door was always open to Sally. He let her use his books. He’d stop by to check on her. And he encouraged her to become involved with the local branch of the Boys and Girls Club of America. In the late 1970’s, the local Club was run from a house with sporting events taking place at different schools and parks. Pat was very involved with the Boys and Girls Club and wanted the organization to have facilities to fully support the needs of the kids, under one roof. They were both involved with the fundraising and planning for the new building and Sally enjoyed seeing his vision become reality.

Molinari also encouraged Merchak to join the PWC Bar Association. She remembers attending her first Bar luncheon, where she met Tom Murphy. They immediately connected because he was a UVA graduate as well. He asked her if she was going to join the local bar and mused about what number she would be, saying he was number 36. When Sally joined the local bar association in 1978, she recalls there were about 50 members, and she was introduced by then president Ralph Coon who said, “and now I want to introduce our first lady member.” She would soon be followed by Janice (Brice) Wellington, Nancy Croteau, Linda Lonas, Sharon Pandak and Wenda Travers. Sally recalls wonderful Bar picnics at Rippon Lodge where Paul Ebert would bring roasted pigs, and remembers that the Annual Dinner Dance was held at Evergreen Country Club. Sally and Tom Underwood chaired a committee that looked into alternate venues for the dance and ultimately moved the event to Airlie where it was held for several years.

Sally fondly recalls the early days of practice in PWC, when the assistant Commonwealth’s attorneys worked part-time and the “prosecutor of the day” would use a vacant courtroom in the old courthouse to cut and make deals in a process that was “literally like being on the trading floor in the stock market.” All the attorneys were trying to catch the prosecutor’s attention and Merchak, who stands about 5 feet tall literally couldn’t be seen. Frank Hoss was standing behind her one day and commented, “You’re having trouble getting noticed down there”... and called out to the prosecutor on her behalf saying, “This young lady needs your attention!” She also recalls the security issues associated with meeting her clients in the old jail, which used to be right behind the old courthouse. The male attorneys used to go back in the cells to meet their clients, but Sheriff Willie Garrison wouldn’t let Sally do that, so he pulled two chairs in the foyer and brought out her clients in leg irons. Sally pointed out that there was no confidentiality with that scenario, so the Sheriff vacated the kitchen, and Sally met her clients at the kitchen table.

Merchak also recalled that Judge Murphy, who sat in PWC General District Court, “delighted in giving as many cases as possible to the brand-new attorneys because he thought we needed the practice.” A first offender, charged with a misdemeanor, would be brought out and Murphy would say to the newly appointed attorney, “Go out in the hall and talk to them and see if you can work something out with the prosecutor.” According to Sally, “... you would meet your client, [in leg irons]. You would go out in the hall, find out what they were charged with. Talk to the prosecutor, the police officer, make a plea arrangement,” and appear before Judge Murphy later in the same afternoon to resolve the case. “Judge Murphy wanted his justice swift.”

While Merchak was building her practice, she became friends with Janice Wellington, a fellow GW Graduate. They would go to court in the morning, meet for lunch, work out at the gym, and head back their respective offices in the afternoon. As her real estate practice took off, Merchak was approached by Peterson and Pesner, a Tyson’s Corner firm that worked closely with builders who were involved with a large number of commercial and residential real estate development projects in the area. They needed help so began looking for other attorneys to join them as “of counsel”, which lead them to bring in Sally. The influx of additional work proved to be more than she could handle, so she approached Janice, then a solo practitioner, for assistance. They became partners, often working 12 hour days during the real estate boom. Merchak and Wellington hired a young associate named Rossie Alston, who had interned with them while in law school. Later, Lawrie Rollison joined the firm, (now Lawrie Moncure). Wellington and Alston sought and received judicial appointments and Moncure now serves as the Chief Magistrate for Prince William County. In 1992, Sally went into partnership with her husband, attorney Bill Ryland, where she now practices almost exclusively family law.

As the interview progressed, Sally Merchak expressed no particular sense of courage or entitlement for the many things she was among the first woman to do. She simply did them because she wanted to and the world willingly accommodated her. In addition to the firsts mentioned here, she attended the first meetings that would later lead to the chartering of the Virginia Women’s Attorneys Association in 1981 and was among the first women to be appointed as a Commissioner in Chancery by Judge Percy Thornton in 1982.