

Lawson makes case with landmark court win

By DEBRA BAKER BECK, *Alumnews* Editor

Leslie Lawson's eighth grade history teacher probably wasn't surprised that his former pupil filed — and won — the first sexual harassment case in the United States in 1978.

After all, Lawson wasn't afraid to challenge her junior high classmates when they questioned whether a woman could be a good astronaut or whether girls deserved equal opportunities in sports. It only seems natural that the 1998 distinguished alumna would play a significant role in a precedent-setting case that challenged one of the practices most devastating to workplace equality.

The case filed by Lawson (BA '69, JD '72) and her legal partner, Lynn Fieger, on behalf of their client in 1978 wasn't the first sexual harassment claim to be made. But it was the first to get to trial, and it set the stage for every case to follow.

Its impact on Lawson's career was significant, too, as news of the victory literally spanned the globe. Response from the legal community was swift and positive.

"It was very obvious, immediately, that what we had done made a difference," she says. "A lawyer could practice their whole life and never have this opportunity."

The suit, filed against Johns-Manville Company by a woman who claimed she was fired for refusing her boss' sexual advances, was the first of many such cases the firm would accept. It opened the doors for women — and men — who suffer repercussions for rebuffing sexually harassing behaviors in the workplace.

Lawson's eagerness to accept that first case came from her own experiences and her growing expertise in discrimination issues. She developed the latter in her first job out of law school — as a trial attorney for the Denver office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Though the "trial attorney" title still makes her chuckle ("A brand new lawyer doesn't know how to beat their way out of a paper bag."), the work she did on behalf of clients facing discrimination was no laughing matter.

Lawson started at the EEOC in January 1973, shortly after a major amendment to the law prohibiting discrimination. At the time, evidence was easy to find, as employers left fairly blatant clues about why they failed to hire women or minorities.

The Casper native originally opted for work in the public sector out of law school, because it seemed to offer the most level playing field for women and minorities. Lawson went through law school in an era when women in the profession were rare. As one of only three females in her class, she faced continual challenges, especially from her fellow students. A government position seemed the best alternative, and the EEOC matched her interests.

"It was exciting to be able to go out and really start making the change that I wanted to be made," Lawson says of the work.

That first job was "challenging and fun," but she eventually tired of the office's poor management. Lawson left after three years and joined the University of Denver College of Law, where she taught in the Clinical Education Program. She also established a part-time private practice.

As the freelance workload blossomed, Lawson dropped the DU responsibilities and opened the practice with Fieger. They specialized primarily in sex discrimination cases, working primarily with



Leslie Lawson

plaintiffs and occasionally advising employers on related policy issues.

Still relatively new to law, and without significant role models nearby, the women mostly made their own way professionally.

"We really didn't have a day-to-day mentor," Lawson says.

The experience sensitized her to the struggles of today's young attorneys, and she tries to make herself available as an informal adviser.

"I think it's important for young lawyers to know that there are experienced people who will help them," she says, adding that she tries to keep her messages realistic but upbeat.

Expanding Horizons

While Lawson loved the challenge of employment law, she also wanted to expand her legal knowledge. So she left the private practice she started with Fieger in 1982 and joined Atlantic Richfield Company as a senior attorney. Originally, she concentrated on work for the company's production section and its mining efforts. She was heavily involved in legal issues surrounding the Black Thunder Coal Mine near Gillette and even helped Atlantic Richfield establish what would become the town of Wright in Campbell County.

Slogging through the muck of a coal mine was a far cry from a big city legal practice.

"I certainly had days when I thought, 'What am I doing? I don't know anything about this!'" she recalls of her days at the mines.

Working for Atlantic Richfield led her to her next career adventure. The company occasionally referred promising employees to Leadership Denver, a program offered through the city's chamber of

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Miscellany

Leslie Lawson is married to Dan Himelspach, also an attorney. They have one daughter, Mariah. In addition to her two UW degrees, Lawson also holds an AA (1967) from Casper College. She is admitted to the Wyoming and Colorado bars and to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Throughout a full career, Lawson has found time to serve her profession and her community. Among her affiliations over the years: Colorado Lawyers for the Arts (director, 1990), Leadership Denver, Alliance of Professional Women (vice president and co-founder), Project Open Heart, American Arbitration Association, Colorado Bar Foundation Fellow, Denver Bar Association (trustee, 1984-87), Colorado Supreme Court Board of Law Examiners, Colorado Women's Bar Association (president, 1984-87), Lawyers for Colorado's Women (president, 1974-75)

commerce to foster leadership development in that community. Once a month, Leadership Denver participants spent a day learning about some aspect of the city. That experience led Lawson to develop an interest in the public sector and finding a way to contribute on a larger scale.

She found that vehicle, as a Denver District Court judge. From 1986-89, Lawson presided over civil and domestic relations cases and developed an appreciation for the law from a new viewpoint. Lawson had heard judges talk about the different perspective they had, but no one had articulated what that difference really was. She found out on her own.

"The minute you're on the other side, it becomes crystal clear that it is very different," Lawson says. As an attorney, one must focus on one side of an issue — even though a good lawyer also is aware of the opponent's interests. But a judge must be able to do much more. Seeing both sides is something she learned to appreciate on the bench.

"I liked being in that neutral position, getting the problem solved," she says. Not everyone can make the transition, but that is something Lawson was able to do.

Change of Perspective

Serving on the bench was extremely difficult work, requiring an overload that most attorneys wouldn't be able to handle. Working too hard and spending years as an overachiever took their toll, mentally and physically.

"There comes a point when you hit the wall, psychologically," Lawson says. Realizing that wasn't easy for someone whose natural response was to just try harder.

"It never occurred to me that I could take that job too seriously, but I did."

Recovery required major life changes. Lawson resigned her judgeship in 1989 and took several months off to recuperate and re-evaluate her career options. Lawson reports that the changes she made in her life as a result of that evaluation period have been just what she needed and that her life is greatly enhanced as a result.

Lawson entered her current phase professionally in 1990, when she went to work for the Denver-based Judicial Arbitration Group, Inc. Today, she presides over arbitration hearings and conducts judicial settlement conferences. She draws upon her judicial experience to act as a neutral party who brings the various sides together to work out a solution to their problems. It's a good fit and a good use of the skills developed over the course of a distinguished career.

Lawson has made other changes as she entered this phase of her life. One of the biggest was the addition of 5-year-old Mariah, whom she and her husband adopted in 1997 from an orphanage in Kazakhstan. Bringing in a child at mid-life added a new dimension to the couple's lives. Adopting an older child brings its own challenges, but they sensed that Mariah would fit well within their family shortly after they met her. Less than a year after coming to America, Mariah, who spoke no English, is fluent in the language. The couple now hope to adopt a boy from the same orphanage.

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She also has been honored many times. Among them: Casper College distinguished alumna (1991), YWCA Woman of Achievement Award (1985), Denver's Ten Most Distinguished (*Denver Business* magazine, 1985), Outstanding Young Women of America (1979), *Who's Who in America's Colleges and Universities* (1971), *Who's Who in American Law* (1997), *Who's Who in American Women* (1998).

Lawson returns to the UW College of Law frequently to speak to current students, and she has served as a mentor to students over the years. She delivered the college's 1997 commencement address.