

Illinois Supreme Court Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow
IL Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism

Mary Ann G. McMorrow worked for the Riordan & Linklater general practice law firm before joining the Cook County State's Attorney's Office in 1955, there she became the first woman to prosecute major felony cases. For several years she practiced civil law from her home. She won the election for Cook County circuit judge in 1976, and retained that position in 1982. Three years later, she was appointed to the First District Appellate Court and was elected to the position in 1986. In 1992, McMorrow was elected to the Illinois Supreme Court, becoming the first woman to ever serve on that Court. In May of 2002, McMorrow was unanimously elected to a three-year term as Chief Justice, becoming the first woman to head any of the three branches of Illinois government. In November of 2002, she was retained for a second ten-year Supreme Court term. McMorrow retired from the Court in 2006.

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Mary Ann G. McMorrow: An Oral History

REARDON: Let's start by going back just a little bit to your decision to become a lawyer. How did that come about?

McMORROW: I had friends in high school, actually, with whom I debated frequently. When I had them to my home, my mother overheard the conversation and the next day she said to me, "Have you ever thought of going to law school?" And I had not, until then.

REARDON: I once heard you say that you had a law professor who circled the word... what was it?

McMORROW: Feel.

REARDON: And said, "We as lawyers don't feel, we believe."

McMORROW: It was highly embarrassing at the time. And it was an exam that was given to us near the beginning of the school year. I just wrote that I feel something was true or not true. The dean, he was the dean of the law school at that time, Dean Fitzgerald, he returned all the papers except, I think, two or three. He held it up and said, "Look I want you to see this." And he drew a big red circle around the word "feel" that I used in one of my answers. "We don't *feel* when we're lawyers, we believe something is true or something is not true." It taught me a lesson, an unforgettable lesson.

REARDON: What is the achievement that you've had that you're the most proud of, Justice McMorrow?

McMORROW: Well, of course, being elected to the Supreme Court. I had not expected that. I had never expected to go that route. But I had a lawyer come to my chambers to see me with an appointment, and she said, "Have you thought about running for the Supreme

Court?” and I said, “Oh no, I had no base to run a campaign for Supreme Court.” And she said, “Well, you do, you have us. You have the women.” And I ran for election to the Supreme Court without party support the first time, and I lost. But I came so close to winning that I was told that I had a very good chance of, if I did it again, I did not want to do that because I thought we don’t want to go through that experience again. It was humbling, it was expensive, it was embarrassing at times. And there just aren’t that many vacancies. But curiously and unexpectedly, a vacancy did occur again. And so, the same lady and but a larger group came to see me and said, “you have got to run.” And I said, “Oh no, not again. I’m not going through this again.” And she said, “Well you have to, we just about won the last time.” And there was nobody else who had credentials that I had. I had both criminal law experience and civil law experience. And I had gotten top ratings from all the bar associations. And so again, she talked me into it and this time I won.

REARDON: What do you see the role of women in the legal profession today and moving forward?

McMORROW: When I became a lawyer, women were relegated to, primarily, domestic relations, traffic matters, and probate work. The important thing that happened in the ‘70s was that women became accepted into the law field, and we were then accepted to do more complex work. Now women can enter into any field that they want; we weren’t permitted to do that before. So, we’ve come a long way, but there’s still a long way to go. When I was a prosecutor in the State’s Attorney’s Office, the man who was in charge of appeals asked me if I would like to argue a case before the Supreme Court of Illinois. I was a young lawyer, and I was thrilled with his question. And so, I studied the case

backwards and forwards, and then the day before we were to go down to Springfield, to argue the case, another boss said that I could not go, that women do not argue before the Supreme Court. And then, many years later, but he was not alive at this time, I became not only a justice but a Chief Justice of the very Court before which I was not permitted to argue.

REARDON: How do you feel when you see—or when you were sitting and saw women arguing before the Supreme Court?

McMORROW: I was very proud of them. I knew what they had gone through to get where they were, and I was just very proud of them.

REARDON: And how important is civility and professionalism to our practice?

McMORROW: I think that civility is crucial to our system of laws and justice, because it's not only the dispensing of justice but also the appearance of justice that is important. The judges and the courts make important decisions; they decide, for example, whether a person should live or die. They decide who should raise a child. They decide how all marital assets should be divided. Things that are life-changing events and the judges must decide that. The difficult questions must be answered by the judges without bad behavior, without somebody screaming or talking in a loud voice.

REARDON: In a more general sense, can you point to how collaboration can advance justice?

McMORROW: I have had lawyers appear before me who, in the trying of their case, were not confrontational. You can do a lot, you can save a lot of money and a lot of aggravation for everyone if you just collaborate where you can. You can't always do it, but where you can. If you did that, it would be to society's benefit.