



I MET JOAN D. FULLER MORE THAN 30 YEARS AGO, when I was a summer associate at Ropes & Gray and she was a partner in the trusts and estates department (now known as the private client group). I then worked closely with her after I joined the department as an associate two years later. Joan retired from Ropes & Gray in 1993, so we only overlapped at the firm for about five years. But she was such an extraordinary mentor that her impact on my life and career was way out of proportion to the relatively brief time we worked together. I was very fortunate to have Joan to guide me during those early, formative years of my career. She was extraordinarily intelligent and had incredibly high standards, which kept me on my toes constantly when I worked with her. Under her supervision, documents needed to be absolutely perfect and memos needed to be thoroughly researched. A stray typo you had missed in a document would cause her to run into your office, waving the defective draft and insisting that you must do better. Recalling advice she herself had received as a young lawyer, she always reminded us that if you were sending something out on Ropes & Gray letterhead, it had better be your absolute best work, because we had standards to uphold.

Joan somehow managed to put the fear of God into you while at the same time embracing you and making you feel loved and valued. There was no arguing with Joan, so if she had confidence in you, you had no choice but to have confidence in yourself. She also loved practicing law, and her enthusiasm was infectious. I remember once doing a particularly thorny research project for her. It was absolutely critical to find a case right on point, so I spent hours in the library scouring the case law. When I checked in with Joan on my progress, she said that she was envious of how much fun I must be having, and that she always loved doing research because it was like being a detective. I had never thought of it that way before, but she really changed my perspective, and from then on I always had a little smile inside when I did legal research. When I finally found a case right on point (thank God!), Joan insisted that we all go out to lunch to celebrate. That was classic Joan.

When Joan took you under her wing, it extended beyond the office—she absolutely insisted that you come visit her

and her husband, Al, in Craftsbury, Vermont, so that she could share her favorite place with you. My visits to the farm, with my husband at first and later with my children, as well, are some of my favorite memories.

Looking back, I realize that as a young lawyer, I probably didn't appreciate the extent to which Joan was a pioneer. In the current "Me Too" era, when we're constantly reminded of all the challenges women still face in the workplace, it is truly amazing what Joan accomplished so many years ago, when the challenges were even greater. She came to work at a law firm when she had young children. Despite being a graduate of Harvard Law School, she was paid less than the male associates in her class. In fact, for the first two years she worked at Ropes & Gray, she paid her babysitters more than she made! Nevertheless, she persisted, and became the first woman partner at Ropes & Gray. The trusts and estates department benefited early on from Joan's strong female leadership; when I arrived 30 years ago, three of the nine partners in our department—Joan, Susan Shapiro and Virginia Coleman—were women, a ratio unheard of in large law firms at the time. Because of Joan, we didn't just think that women could be as good lawyers as men, we knew they could be better.

As I think about Joan's legacy, I am inspired to challenge all women lawyers today to do for each other what Joan did for me: demand excellence, embrace and support one another, and encourage an enjoyment of the law. The results can be dramatic. Today, 27 percent of Ropes & Gray partners worldwide are women (compared to an industry average of 19 percent), and that includes our new chair-elect, Julie Jones, who will be the first woman chair in the firm's history. Joan would be bursting with pride at what she started.



Brenda Diana joined the private client group of Ropes & Gray in 1988, and became a partner of the firm in 1996. Working with families and individuals, she serves as trustee of numerous trusts, helps to settle estates, and prepares estate plans.