

IWF Early Leaders: Drucilla Ramey  
By Jenny Erwin  
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**When I attended the recent annual meeting, I ran into Drucilla Ramey, who was wearing a stylish red fascinator, claiming to be channeling Kate Middleton. I wasn't at all surprised, as I vividly remember our animated conversation when we met for the first time during Summer Camp at the Stillheart Retreat Center. I learned at camp that we both shared a passion for gender equity issues...she as a civil rights attorney and I as an educator. I remembered we also had a Tennessee connection, so I was eager to interview her for this series to learn more about her history with the Forum.**

**Dru's concern for those given far fewer advantages than she and many other white middle class people were accorded, was instilled in her by her parents from an early age. As a result, she has been a fierce advocate for women and minority rights throughout her life. Her passion, focus and tenaciousness continue to make a difference and she has been recognized by local and national legal organizations for her commitment and work. I encourage you to reach out to her and learn more about her efforts and current interests. Hats off to you, Dru for your lifetime of making a difference!**



**When did you join IWF and what was your position at that time?**

I joined Women's Forum West in 1990. At that time, I had been the Executive Director and General Counsel of the Bar Association of San Francisco for around five years, ultimately holding that position for more than 17 years. While I have been an IWF member for 26 years, six of those years were with the New York Forum. I was working in New York City from 2002 -2008 and was very active in the Forum there while serving as Executive Director of the National Association of Women Judges.

**What knowledge did you have about the early history of the organization and how did it impact your decision to join?**

My mother, one of the few leading women medical school professors and feminist speakers in the nation in the 60's-90's, was a founding member of the Washington, D.C. Forum. Not typically a joiner, my mother nevertheless enjoyed the company and programs of this diverse group, who included giants like Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and even Wonder Woman (Lynda Carter). So I first learned about and occasionally attended meetings of the D.C. Forum. This was pivotal, since the Forum was generally not a well-known organization among civil rights lawyers in San Francisco, and even when it was better known, was largely considered to be too expensive. However, I knew and respected Bernice (Bunny) Sadler and Barbara Seaman, both friends of my mom's and both extremely active in the civil rights movement on the East Coast and this had an impact on my decision. I was also encouraged to join by my friend Judge Marilyn Hall Patel, a former civil rights lawyer who was appointed to be a [federal judge](#) in 1980 after being nominated by President [Jimmy Carter](#). I really didn't know anything about the SF Forum's early history, but I knew a few of the early members.

**What was the most challenging aspect of your career at the time you joined and how did the organization provide support to help you deal with this?**

My greatest challenge at that time was feeling a lack of a level of knowledge or experience necessary to excel at many of my roles as the head of the S.F. Bar Association. Given my background as a civil rights litigator, I felt able to work as an equal with members of the BASF Board on many of the progressive programs we were launching. But having to raise really substantial money for new diversity and civil rights initiatives and needing to effectively develop and administer a multi-million dollar budget, I felt a bit lost. Lawyers are so often put into leadership positions in major nonprofits like this when they are highly unlikely to have any formal training or experience in many of the fundamental job responsibilities of being a nonprofit CEO, including management, administration, finance, development, human resources. I mean, let's be honest, nothing about ERISA or non-profit accounting is intuitively obvious to a civil rights lawyer. Neither was Board development and sustaining relationships with the Board and our donors. While I had chaired the ACLU of Northern California and the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women, among others, I had nevertheless not been directly responsible for the fundraising or the budget. Many Forum members had this kind of experience, mostly in for-profits, but that was ok with me and talking with them helped me grow into this role. IWF membership also put me next to women leaders of large corporate law firms and corporations who were extremely helpful in my fundraising efforts. A few even made me less of a philistine, by taking me to Symphony and Opera openings—a new first for me!

**What was the major benefit of membership when you joined either WFW or Professional Women's Alliance? What do you see as the major membership benefit now?**

I enjoy meeting and being with a variety of women of all ages whose work is totally different from mine. That was and still is a primary benefit of membership. Developing

deep and long lasting friendships has always been important so it was much fun to reconnect with some of my early Forum friends at the recent annual meeting. I was especially grateful to the Forum during the six years I worked in New York City. Since I was new to the area and to my surprise, felt kind of isolated, I really needed to develop a new circle of friends there. Happily, I took advantage of most NY Forum programs. I even ended up authoring articles for a feminist newspaper run by one member, and honing my business skills from another, and I ultimately truly benefited on both a professional and personal level. New York's Breakfast at Tiffany's annual soiree was quite amazing as well. Now, as so many of us are transitioning into retirement, or in my case, the 'hybrid status' that knows no name, it's even more important to connect with our peers to gain insight, ideas and support and enthusiasm for our next move.

**It's been 35 + years since IWF started and do you think it's easier now for women in your field to advance to the top leadership roles? Why or why not?**

I do not think that women lawyers today are necessarily having an easier time of it. I entered law school in 1968 during the Vietnam War era, the year that men lost their education deferments from the draft, so the law schools for the first time had to actually open to admit more than the customary four or five women students. (Hey, isn't that what affirmative action is all about?) But while there were fewer of us in those early years of the soon-to-be-huge influx of women, I believe there was a greater sense of sisterhood among us. Also there was greater similarity in our backgrounds since so many of us who would have chosen the "giving" professions, e.g., teaching or social work, were now choosing law as a way to achieve social change. This marked the beginning of a critical mass for women lawyers, which quickly became more diverse as to areas of interest, including corporate law. However, those new aspirations were not necessarily met by much acceptance in the large corporate law firms or the organized bar. One could actually say that despite the larger numbers, that the ambiance hasn't changed all that much today. I hate to be a cynic, but I don't think that women in law school today or those just starting their practice have the same sense of solidarity as we did in those early days, when so many of us saw it as a movement—a revolution for equality.

And, sadly, senior women lawyers are still facing challenges, bias, and barriers in gaining top positions within large and mid-sized firms, as well as in corporations. This is tragically magnified for women (and men) of color. Even putting aside the rigid resistance in the profession to employing "family friendly" policies and practices, there's still a belief by law firm leaders that women simply can't or don't want to cut it, that they fail to have the "fire in their belly" or commitment to be "rain makers". Beliefs also persist that women lack the same competence or analytic ability as their male counterparts, are either too "aggressive" or too "passive" and, ultimately that they do not belong in the top, most responsible and well-paid positions. Much has now been written about unconscious or implicit bias, and that's critically important. But I believe we must also acknowledge, directly confront, and end what is in fact a significant amount of explicit bias that pervades our profession. Both of these phenomena have led to breathtakingly large wage gaps, especially in the top jobs, and a sense of disillusionment and futility in the women fighting for equal opportunity to succeed in their workplaces.

## **What made it possible for you to succeed in your field?**

I was most fortunate to come from a family that valued education and who were passionate about attacking inequality in our society. Born in 1917, my mother Estelle was an impoverished Jewish girl from Brooklyn with a tough, though illiterate mother who insisted that she get an education. She was lucky enough to go to Brooklyn College for free in the middle of the Great Depression and then to marry a feminist Southern Baptist lawyer who supported her work and success every step of the way. He did this as she progressed through her higher education, through her first professorship at the University of Chicago Medical School and then throughout her 40-year career as a professor of physiology and biophysics, with a specialty in endocrinology, at Georgetown University Medical School. My father, who ultimately became an Atomic Energy Commissioner, was especially proud of my mother's second career as a national feminist speaker. With a first generation career woman and an early feminist mother who used to say, "God knows how successful my kids might've had if they hadn't had a working mother!", I had strong support and motivation to use my skills, talents and interests. I strongly believe that if a woman's mother was an early trail blazer who really loved what she did out in the world, it is much easier for the second generation, like me, to have a successful career.....free from much of the guilt regarding family and children as I've seen in so many of my friends.

*JE note: After my interview with Dru, I did some research on her mother and the information below provides this interesting perspective*

The Encyclopedia of World Biography described Dr. Estelle Ramey this way... "Estelle was best known for her public challenges to society's myths about the physiological—especially hormonal—differences between the genders as they relate to political and social roles. In 1970, she came to national prominence for stating that there was no hormonal reason for women not to hold executive positions, including the presidency, which led to her nicknames "[Mort Sahl](#) of the women's movement" and "George Burns with an X chromosome." Endlessly quotable, Ramey was a popular [feminist](#) speaker on related topics and drew on her own background as a respected female scientist to support her views."

Comments by Ruth Bader Ginsberg at her friend Estelle's memorial service in 2009, provides further insight into the woman whose life inspired her own daughter to reach for the stars. "She was brilliant, brave, bold, radiantly and agelessly beautiful, and the very best company. I treasured our friendship and valued her advice."

## **What are you most proud of in your career and your most significant contribution to your profession?**

I am most proud of how I was able to help transform the Bar Association of San Francisco into a nationally recognized public service organization. With a focus on the diversity and pro bono representation for the poor, it became a highly effective resource for improving the lives of disenfranchised people. As a civil rights attorney, I realized

that without the good hearts and generous funding from many of those working in and running the large corporate firms, our legal nonprofits would find it hard to exist, let alone thrive. I felt it was vital for privileged women like me to “pay it forward” and I feel I have been able to contribute, in some small part, to helping create a more just and equal society. I am also very proud of my husband, who has fought all his life against injustice and supported me in everything I do. I am equally proud of our daughter who, after four years in Mexico as the legal director of a bi-national migrant rights organization, is now a senior attorney with Equal Rights Advocates. Most of her qualities closely mirror those attributed to her grandmother by Justice Ginsburg.

**What was the best advice you got as you climbed the ladder to success? Is it still relevant for aspiring women leaders today?**

There are three pieces of advice that come to mind for me and yes, they are still relevant. The first I learned early in my career. Instead of keeping quiet and trying to fix a major organizational problem alone, you need to work with board, staff, funders and other stakeholders to resolve the issue together. Too often women take it on themselves, fearing that if they let anyone know there’s a problem, they’ll be showing weakness and then unmasked as the fraud they always feared they really might be. Tina Fey calls this the “imposter syndrome”, and once she realized that women in general all feel that way, she doesn’t worry about it anymore. I’m with Tina on that. Real problems, however aren’t about you alone, they are problems of the organization, and once you reach out to and seek a solution with others who are committed to the organization, you end up with a resolution that is not only better, but one that has the buy-in, support and pride of those who worked together. Two other important and oh-so-true pieces of advice helped me as well. One came from my mother who said, “It’s astonishing how little it takes to reach out and help someone. It is a great privilege to extend yourself for others.” The other words of wisdom are about the importance of treating all people with kindness. That advice was reinforced by the highest ranking female at Sales Force who recently told a large audience that kindness towards others is one of the most powerful traits many women especially possess. As such, it should not be disdained as typically “female” (read, “weak”) qualities, but rather should be regarded and effectively used as a powerful tool in achieving success for the whole group and the entire enterprise.

**Are you currently retired and if so, was it a challenge to make that transition? What helped you successfully navigate retirement?**

I don’t regard myself as retired and in fact I don’t want to be. However, I don’t want to be working 60+ hours a week at this stage of my life. Recently, I became the Chair of the Board of Equal Rights Advocates, a magnificent organization that helps millions of women and girls achieve educational and employment equality, and I am enjoying my volunteer, if heavy-duty, work with them. I do a great deal of public speaking on a variety of legal and equality-focused topics, especially on how large law firms and other organizations should and can achieve racial, gender, LGBTQ and disability-based diversity. Also, I am beginning to explore ways to create a more formal consulting practice in these areas based on my experiences as a civil rights leader, CEO of a law

school and Executive Director of major judicial and bar organizations. I would enjoy connecting with other IWF members to hear about their post- full-time career undertakings.

**What leadership roles have you held within the Forum and what current programs are of most interest to you?**

I have not held any leadership roles in the Forum, but have enjoyed small group dinners with people I don't know, and "problem solving" sessions. I would be interested in helping pull together a future program on women's legal status in the U.S.....past, present and future.

**How do you define success?**

Success is being able to take action to ensure more equality --gender, racial, LGBTQ, disability, economic and class-- in our country, which remains woefully segregated, especially at the top.

**Final comments, thoughts or words of wisdom**

It bothers me when older women say to younger women "You can't have it all." Men never say that to each other! I believe it's a matter of each person's definition of what exactly "ALL" is at any particular time, and that it changes over time. I also believe that much of what women call "making choices" actually is a function of others making certain choices impossible e.g., ongoing discrimination and rigidity of firms, effectively pushing women out of the legal workplace. Many of these women are not really responding to the siren song of full-time at-home motherhood, but rather to the push out the door by employers who are unwilling to create a workplace supportive of families, coupled with ongoing patterns of flat-out discrimination.

Lastly, thank God for close women friends, without whom I'd be lost.