

Governor Bush Honored With FAWL President's Award for Diversity of Judicial Appointments

The following is the text of FAWL President Susan Fox's remarks at the March 29, 2002 ceremony at which she presented Florida Governor Jeb Bush with the FAWL President's Award.

FAWL is an organization with a mission of gender equality in the legal profession and in the law. One of the ways that FAWL has advanced this mission is by working to diversify the judiciary.

FAWL was founded 51 years ago, when there were few women judges and for the most part, our society did not believe women could be judges. One of our founding members was Judge **Mattie Belle Davis**, who was one of the first woman judges in Florida and for several years was the only woman judge in Florida.

For many years, there were no women judges in most circuits in Florida. This started to change only about 15 years ago, in the mid-

1980s, as a few women started to be appointed in the larger counties. It is incredible to think how recent this change actually is, and that there are still some circuits that have no women judges at all. Judge Davis is a living reminder of how recent our acceptance in the judiciary has been.

In discussing judicial appointments, the questions invariably come up: Don't you just want the best person selected for a judgeship? Why does it matter if the person is male or female?

Although it is a truism that a wise old woman judge and a wise old man judge would arrive at the same decision, there are differences in human experience that women bring to the judiciary. And

the presence of women judges, particularly on collegial panels, changes the dynamics of decision-making, and changes the interaction between the court and the public.

Before there were women judges, most male judges believed there was no gender bias in law and courts. The Gender Bias Study Commissions have helped to explode this misconception



PRESIDENT'S AWARD CEREMONY (from left) Past President Barbara Egan, Secretary Merideth Nagel, Governor Jeb Bush, JOURNAL Editor Dinita James, President-elect Siobhan Shea and President Susan Fox at the President's Award Ceremony.

and helped to erase most gender bias from the courtroom. Women judges not only decrease the incidence of gender bias, but improve public perception of gender neutrality in the courts. This public perception of the fairness of our courts is one of the fundamental requirements for maintaining a society in which disputes are settled in a peaceful, non-violent manner.

Having women in the judiciary has improved opportunities for women in the legal profession, and helped to change obsolete stereotypes about women—stereotypes about what they are capable of and their ability to be competent decision makers.

One way that these stereotypes are

affected by the presence of women judges is demonstrated by a story from my home county—Hillsborough County, where we have a ceremonial courtroom with portraits of the former judges. This courtroom plays host to community events throughout the year, particularly with school children paying visits on Law Day, Take Your Daughter to Work Day, and any other time they

study the dynamics of the court. Until this year, the portraits were all of male judges.

Because the portraits were done only upon retirement, and the advent of women judges is too recent for any to have retired, there were no women judges pictured. For many years, this passed unmentioned, but in recent years, the young girls visiting the court have begun to question, "Where are the women judges?" This year,

Diana Allen (now deceased) retired due to health reasons, and her

portrait became the first to hang in the courtroom.

Women bring a wider range of human perspective to aid decision-making. For example, women judges have brought increased attention to and understanding of domestic violence, probably the most significant social issue of our time, because most violence is learned in the family and passed down from generation to generation. It was not until we had women on the Florida Supreme Court that the court overturned the "castle doctrine," which would have required a woman to leave the home in the middle of the night, leaving the babies behind, in a domestic dispute rather than defend herself.

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