

Cynthia Gayle Gilmour Campling (1947-2014)

A Reflection by Gloria Nardi-Bell

It's February. It's cold. I think I'll wear pants to the office today. Do the women in your office wear pants? Do you think about it? I do, and then I think of Cynthia Campling. Why? I remember not being permitted to wear pants to work, and not complaining about it. It was 1975. I was a legal secretary. A condition of employment was that "the girls" wore dresses and skirts to the office. No pants. Then, in 1976, my employers magically and mysteriously changed the rule. Trousers would now be tolerated. I didn't know why. Years later, I learned that Cynthia spearheaded my ability to shed my skirt.

Cynthia was born on November 8, 1947, and was raised by a forwarding thinking and strong mother. Cynthia grew up in Kingston and met Fred in high school. They married in 1971 and immediately started law school. By the winter of 1974, Cynthia was articling in Kingston for Speal & Viner. Her principals required women to wear skirts in the office. Cynthia wore pant suits, a more practical choice during cold Kingston winters. On a frigid day that winter, after several warnings, one of her principals took her aside and gave Cynthia an ultimatum: go home at noon and change, or start looking for a new articling position as of 5:00 p.m. that day. Cynthia did not go home, she did not change, and she was dismissed. When Cynthia approached the Law Society of Upper Canada and the Ministry of Labour, their response was that this was just a discipline issue within a law firm. Well, it did not take long for Cynthia's dismissal to become national news. On January 24, 1974, the Ottawa Journal ran the story under title "Law student dismissed for wearing pantsuit". Journalistic interest in Cynthia's termination triggered an investigation by the Status of Women Council. Ultimately, Cynthia's courage to oppose sexism in her articling year resulted in the 1st anti-discrimination rules in the legal profession.

Cynthia successfully completed her articles with Cunningham & Little, and was called to the bar in 1975. She began working for the Ontario Securities Commission in Toronto.

Shortly afterwards, Fred and Cynthia moved to Hamilton when Fred secured a position in the Crown's office. After commuting to Toronto for a while, Cynthia took a job in a Hamilton law firm in 1979, where she taught herself real estate law and learned to drive a car at the age of 32. Within a year, Cynthia opened her first practice with Phyllis Gordon, where she could devote herself to issues of social justice. For example, early in her career, Cynthia acted for the 1st co-op housing project in Hamilton for women escaping abusive men and for the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres in negotiating a start-up government grant.



When I recently asked colleagues about Cynthia, they offered the following descriptors: forward-thinking, tenacious, a lion, hard-working, intelligent, scary, determined, well-prepared, knowledgeable, accurate, well-spoken, never backed down from a challenge, kind, witty, fair-minded, formidable, and private.

These qualities enriched us all. Cynthia, along with a handful of other women, blazed the trail for female litigators who were a rarity in Hamilton in 1980. Cynthia leaves behind a legacy of reported cases which developed and advanced family law over the 33 years during which she practised in Hamilton. During those years, working more than fulltime for her clients, Cynthia raised 2 children with Fred, was a hockey coach for her son's team, sewed Halloween costumes for her children, rescued stray animals, campaigned for the Liberal party, took ballet lessons, laughed so heartily that she snorted, never lost sight of the importance of charitable works, and mentored many lawyers (including me). When I sought help on a legal problem, I always marvelled how quickly Cynthia would respond and would provide me usually from her memory with the rule or case which governed my conundrum.

Cynthia was a talented and respected lawyer, an activist, a wife, a mom, a grandmother, a good friend, and a computer whiz although she never learned to type. Cynthia left us far too early on May 20, 2014. Her favourite song was "Think of Me" from Phantom of the Opera. So, the next time you put on a pair of pants, think of Cynthia, and belt out that song at the top of your lungs! I'm sure that she will hear you in heaven. ■

This reflection was written by Gloria Nardi-Bell as part of the HLA Memory Book Project.

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