A Tribute to Rosalie E. Wahl

Jim Ramstad
A TRIBUTE TO ROSALIE E. WAHL

Hon. Jim Ramstad†

When Justice Rosalie Wahl was appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1977, she was the first woman to serve on Minnesota's highest court. Years later, she saw the Court become the first in the nation with a majority of women justices. And in the surest sign of progress, she retired last year in an era when a woman’s appointment to the bench is no longer a big news story.

From the moment Rosalie Wahl became an Associate Justice, she hit the ground running and quickly earned a reputation as a tireless worker and a thoughtful, compassionate jurist. Justice Wahl faced a tough election battle less than a year after she took her seat, and Chief Justice Sheran offered to reduce her caseload. However, she declined because of her desire not to burden the other justices with extra cases.

Justice Wahl developed a strong work ethic long before she joined the Supreme Court. She was already the mother of four children upon entering law school at the age of 38. Justice Wahl had her fifth child during her second year of night classes. Following graduation, she served six years in the state public defender's office, then four years as a William Mitchell College of Law professor. Her ability to juggle the competing demands of family, academics and career prepared her well for challenges on the bench.

Rosalie Wahl’s tenure as Associate Justice was important for women, and not just because her appointment ended the all-male history of the Minnesota Supreme Court. One of Justice Wahl’s most enduring legacies is her work as chair of a task force on gender fairness in the legal system.

As a coauthor of the Violence Against Women Act, which Congress passed in 1994, I have a special appreciation for Rosalie Wahl’s pioneering efforts. Her 1989 task force recommendations provided the basis for the Minnesota law to assist

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sexual assault and domestic abuse victims. In turn, the Minnesota statute helped shape the federal law.

Justice Wahl also chaired a racial bias task force, which published recommendations in 1993. Her commitment to equal justice for all Americans is another lasting legacy.

Shortly before her retirement, Justice Wahl remarked, “I think the law should have a human face. Everything we do affects people; it doesn’t become a dry bunch of words in books on the shelf.”

Rosalie Wahl had a special affinity for the underprivileged and people in need, and she was always mindful of the human impact of court decisions. But Justice Wahl also tried to apply the law as it was written, even when she would have preferred a different result.

It has been said that the best judges have both a heart and a head for justice. The Minnesota Supreme Court was well served by Associate Justice Rosalie Wahl, who used her heart and head on behalf of those who came seeking justice.