

PUBLICATION

Susan E. Rich: A Legacy of "Firsts"

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Interviewed by Amy W. Mahone

Susan Elliott Rich is a legend at Baker Donelson. In fact, she holds all of the "firsts" – first female shareholder, first woman to be an Office Managing Shareholder and first woman appointed to the Firm's Board of Directors. None of that is really important to her, though, and it nearly embarrasses her to discuss those accolades. When you interact with Susan, you have no idea she is such a big deal. You just see a fiercely smart, poised, kind, generous, glamorous woman who is likely the wittiest person in the room.

Susan began her practice in Columbus, Georgia, in 1976 where she quickly became the firm's first female partner. Susan relocated to Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1982 where she worked at a couple of firms before she and Baker Donelson shareholder Dick Gossett opened the Heiskell Donelson firm in October 1986. That firm later merged with Caldwell, Heggie & Helton, to eventually become Baker Donelson. Through most of those early years, Susan was the only female attorney at her firm. One of the difficulties Susan faced was that with each lateral move, she was unable to keep her title as partner. At one point, a colleague wanted to wait to promote Susan to partner because he was "just trying to be smart – business-wise." Susan responded, "I know you are. And you have a choice. You can make me a partner, which I will not make you a bit sorry about, or you can say it's going to take some time; but I am telling you that I will look for another place to go." Shortly thereafter, Susan was named a shareholder.

When I inquired about how she rose through the leadership ranks, Susan said that during the time when she was developing her practice, law firms were beginning to make a conscious effort to focus on diversity. Then, in her typical fashion, Susan said "it is also because of the same reasons that you are successful – you are pleasant, diplomatic, get your job done and get along with just about everybody. You are not a person who everyone wants to stay away from." To me, this is what makes Susan a great leader. She's kind, empathetic and wants to talk about you more than about herself. She builds authentic relationships with everyone from shareholders to runners to the catering staff.

As we talked about whether there are still barriers for women in positions of leadership, Susan told me she never encountered them at Baker Donelson. "In this firm, I have never felt any discrimination. I have never been made to feel any different than anyone else sitting around the table. And a lot of times, they really listened because it was a different perspective."

Susan's advice for aspiring female professionals:

- "You always have to get the job done; you must be real, 100 percent trustworthy and diplomatic. You must maintain confidences. It is simple stuff."
- "Never be fake; do not use other people; do not fail to give others credit of any sort – for their ideas, work, energy or other contribution. What we do is always a team effort, and above all you must have respect for your co-workers."

What can businesses do to help increase retention of promising female leaders?

- "Give people – women and men – REAL work options and make sure everyone understands the choices on the front end. And don't make people feel badly about their choices. We have to stop thinking that every woman wants to get married and have kids or, alternatively, to be a shareholder or in a leadership position. We have to stop treating people (women and men) poorly if they do not want to be in a leadership position or do not want to work full-time for whatever reason. There are enough pressures on everyone without making people feel badly for their choices."

Susan has many passions outside of her legal practice including gardening, animals (particularly dogs), and cooking for and entertaining others. She is also a very accomplished painter. In fact, until her second year of college she thought she would be an artist, but realized that she might not be able to support herself with a career in art. She respected her father, a lawyer, and his peers, and decided she wanted to be like her father's generation of lawyers. "People like Tom Caldwell – smart, kind, well-mannered gentlemen who got the job done. None of the nonsense you hear about now with people. I saw it as a 'gentleman's' practice and thought that was how it would be."

In 2011, the Firm created an award in Susan's name for Baker Donelson attorneys who display excellence in the promotion of and commitment to women in the legal profession. Again, she is a little embarrassed by that award and does not think she has done anything all that special. As I watch Susan interact with people and learn more about her accomplishments over her 40 years of practice, I think she is extraordinary. She has and continues to focus on the "simple stuff."