

Retired Judge Sheila Murphy: Mobilizing Change Artists

By Shelley Sandoval

“When things are going wrong, they’re actually going right, and you just don’t know it. If it doesn’t go according to the plans, look at the big picture and focus on your goal, remember we’re all *change artists*, each person can effectuate change.”

- Judge Sheila Murphy (Ret.)

Judge Sheila Murphy, who retired in 1999, inspires and influences change everyday. With the energy, purpose, and passion of a Golda Meier, Murphy seeks to make paradigm changes in our community.

She believes change is possible. That each of us can be change artists. That each of us can change our community. But it’s important to start with ourselves.

Murphy’s work spans service as a Cook County Public Defender, Federal Defender panel attorney, of counsel to Rothschild, Barry and Myers, trial judge, and, in 1992, the first female presiding judge of a Cook County district court. She brought the first drug treatment court to Illinois and opened a school in the basement of the courthouse for children expelled from school.

She also opened the first domestic violence court in the suburbs with the help of 37 area police chiefs. With the advice of court administrator Joy Lee, the staff learned about trauma, substance abuse and mental illness. Janet Reno, the Attorney General of the United States, befriended Judge Murphy, and provided funds through the Justice Department to send seven Markham judges to Miami to learn how to preside in drug treatment courts. Judges started out with some opposition, but soon embraced the concept.

Throughout her career, Murphy has advocated for more women to be in positions of power, and for the Cook County Bar Association to have defense of prisoners’ opportunities.

While it is easy to focus on the successes, as an associate judge in the domestic violence court, Murphy recalls she was faced with significant opposition to her diverse thinking. After identifying the need for a children’s room, Murphy stepped up installing a room in which could children play while at the courthouse. A judicial supervisor told her to stop work on the children’s room, “You’re not a social worker,” he remarked. When she nevertheless continued the effort, she was swiftly re-assigned to Traffic Court.

Meeting resistance with integrity, grace, and determination, sometimes means picking your battles, arming yourself with the ability to adapt within the circumstances, and practice patient resiliency. Later, attorney Laurel Bellows objected to Murphy’s treatment and Murphy was transferred to Chancery. Eventually, however, the children’s room became a reality, a tribute to her remarkable character and intellect.

Murphy’s natural bold and wise attitude seems to have no brakes. After observing the progressive structure of the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, New York, Murphy is now working to develop new resources and attitudes within the Illinois court system. She teaches Restorative Justice with Professor Michael Seng at John Marshall Law School and co-chairs the School’s Restorative Justice Project. Seng and Murphy also edited a law book, *Restorative Practices...A Holistic Approach*.

As a change artist, Murphy is always looking for ways to make changes that improve lives. For example, providing tennis shoes to a young offender may be a simple means to improve morale and balance behaviorisms by

encouraging naturally occurring endorphins associated with cardio exercise. As she says, “This is how we effectuate change. Kindness creates change. Fear creates violence.”

Judge Murphy also promotes the Illinois Lawyers’ Assistance Program or LAP, which provides wellness resources and support to judges, attorneys, and law students – the only entity that provides cost-free, confidential counseling for the legal community. Murphy has been a LAP member since the 1980s and serves on its Board by appointment of the Illinois Supreme Court.

All of us should try to emulate Judge Murphy and be change artists.

For more information about LAP, visit our site at www.illinoislap.org, or contact the Chicago LAP office at 20 South Clark St., Suite 450, 312-726-6607 or 800-527-1233. You may also send a totally confidential email to gethelp@illinoislap.org. No problem or concern is too big or too small. You have the ability to affect the future of our profession for the better.

Shelley Sandoval is the Legal Community Liaison for the Illinois Lawyers’ Assistance Program.