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WOMEN IN LAW

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES OF HARD WORK, PERSEVERANCE,
AND PURPOSE FROM WOMEN IN THE LEGAL INDUSTRY

STORY STARTS ON PAGE 8

Gina F. Rubel

CEO & General Counsel, Furia Rubel

As a female attorney who began her career in the mid-1990s, I have had the pleasure and privilege throughout my career to be inspired and influenced by one of City's most influential women lawyers. **Deborah "Deb" Willig** is widely renowned as one of the region's, if not the nation's, leading union-side labor attorneys.



Willig

Her nearly 50-year career practicing law sets the high-water mark for a life dedicated to advancing rights and creating opportunities for all, including historically marginalized people: women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. Early on in her career as a lawyer, Deb chose to focus her practice on labor law. Her guiding mission then, as now, was to give those without power – the proverbial “little guy” – the fierce advocacy and resources needed to stand against well-heeled corporations and owners that exploit their workers and perpetuate inequality.

Deb has long been a leader in the legal profession and especially with the Philadelphia Bar Association. While I was a judicial intern still in law school, Deb was elected Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association. She was the first woman leader to hold the post in the Association's then 190-year history.

During her tenure, Deb changed the face of the Association. She appointed women to chair more than half of the Association's committees. Every major appointment, including the Chair of the Board of Governors, the Chair of the Judicial Commission, and the Chair of the Bench-Bar Conference, was a woman. Every speaker at every quarterly meeting was a woman attorney, or women commentator on legal issues. And Deb appointed the first woman editor of the Philadelphia Bar Reporter.

It was during that time, as a young lawyer, when it became abundantly clear that there was a place for women, supported by women, in the Philadelphia legal community. Since then, Deb has been honored with many Lifetime Achievement, Woman of Distinction, industry and community awards, including the Sandra

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Day O'Connor Award from the Philadelphia Bar Association.

Deb is a leader in inclusiveness in the legal profession. Perhaps the most visible demonstration of her commitment to advancing opportunities for women has been within her own firm for which she serves as managing partner. Willig, Williams & Davidson is one of the largest woman-owned law firms in the United States. The chairs of three of the four departments are women. More than half of the equity partners are women and half of the non-equity partners are women. In 1982, Willig, Williams & Davidson became the first firm in Philadelphia to implement paid maternity leave. More than 8 out of 10 women in the firm have worked either temporarily or permanently on a part-time basis without any negative affect on their compensation or their ability to rise to partnership level.

A leader and trailblazer throughout her extraordinary career, Deb recognized early on that “rainmaking” is a critical part of the path to partnership. She determined to put into practice strategies that would help expand opportunities for women lawyers to bring in significant, high-value cases. She has mentored many young attorneys on business development and how to attain partnership status. She is generous with her time and expertise.

A mountain of clinical and academic studies has documented thoroughly the continuing dearth of women in the highest leadership roles at law firms nationwide. Deb decided long ago not simply to study the problem, but to solve it – by hiring women and people who have been historically underrepresented in the law, by promoting them, by mentoring them, by referring them business, and by helping their practices thrive.

“If you see a problem, at the end of the day, you need to stop making studies about it and do something about it,” Deb said. “For those who say it isn't possible, I would say, ‘Look at my firm. It can be done.’”

Deb's legion of professional accomplishments and her legacy of contributions to advance gender equality on the bench and in the bar, to lift other women attorneys, and to fight for the rights of women and marginalized communities in workplaces nationwide, have set the bar high for what it means to be a trailblazing Philadelphia woman lawyer.