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TRAILBLAZERS

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What was the genesis of the path that has made you a trailblazer?

My path to becoming a female litigator in 1971, when many 'big law' firms had yet to hire their first female associate for any career path, was both fortuitous and naïve. I had no lawyers in my family and about all I knew was that lawyers often played important roles in American history and what TV lawyers did in court looked exciting. I also was blissfully unaware that many law firms, including the majority of those in Atlanta, would not be interested in employing me because of my gender, regardless of my academics. However, four years as a debater at Emory and success in moot court at Harvard Law had reinforced my desire to be a trial lawyer. Though only two Atlanta 'big law' firms of all that interviewed at Harvard offered me a summer job, I accepted that job at the firm where I recently celebrated my 50th anniversary. I was able to achieve my goal of being a trial lawyer (though unlike the TV lawyers, I never have handled a criminal case) and at 28, became its first female partner. My firm remains as committed to diversity and inclusion now as it was when I was 21.

What sort of change has resulted from the concept?

When I began practicing, few women were in court representing corporate clients. My firm let me take an active role in trials within my first year and try smaller cases in my second year. I thus demonstrated quickly (as did the few other women then involved in business litigation) that women could handle themselves as well as men in court. This created an environment in which other women could find jobs at any of Atlanta's large law firms and follow a trial lawyer career path if that fit their skills and interests.

What bearing will this have on the future?

I hope my experience demonstrates that those who come from a background with no "connections" and confront obstacles that have nothing to do with their own abilities nevertheless can, if they choose the right environment in which to practice law, enjoy a rewarding, lengthy and intellectually engaging career.