

What I Wish I Knew Then: Judy Harris Kluger

By Steve Cohen

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Judy Harris Kluger is the chief operating officer of Sanctuary for Families, one of New York's largest service providers and advocacy organizations providing assistance to victims of gender-based violence.

Before taking the helm of Sanctuary for Families in 2014, she served as a judge in numerous courts throughout New York State. She ultimately became the chief of policy and planning, a position where she oversaw New York State's 300 problem-solving courts.

I spoke with her soon after attending the Sanctuary for Families' 40th anniversary gala, and reached out because until then, I had little understanding of the scope, impact or battle against domestic violence.

Judge Kluger's insights about the significant changes not only of the legal landscape surrounding domestic violence, but also of its economic and societal dimensions, were truly an eye-opener. And our conversation underscored the challenges still ahead.

Educational Journey and Early Career

I grew up in Queens, New York, and began considering the law as a career at a very young age. My immigrant Jewish parents were survivors of the Nazi terror of World War II and having lived in countries that abandoned the rule of



Judy Harris Kluger, chief operating officer of Sanctuary for Families.

law, they often reminded me of its significance. They were also very supportive and encouraged me to pursue my passions, even allowing me to travel to Manhattan (on three subway lines and a bus) so I could attend an academically rigorous high school.

In high school, though I wasn't a member of the debate team, I soon found myself running for schoolwide office and advocating and debating with school administrators about student-life issues. Perhaps serendipitously, as a high school junior, I took a career aptitude test. The results suggested I pursue law and I followed that path.

When I started law school, only about 10% of the students were women, but change was coming. By the time I graduated in 1977, the entering

class was 30% women, and the pioneers of the feminist movement of the 1970s were demanding social and political change. I benefited from the hard-fought changes that resulted from their advocacy. Sadly, we have to fight some of those battles again today.

After graduation, I went to work as an assistant district attorney in the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office. There were only five women in the group of 35 law school graduates who I started with, there were no women in the office's homicide bureau, and no female bureau chiefs.

In many ways the trajectory of my career ran parallel to the growing awareness of the need for laws, policies and advocacy to address gender-based violence.

In 1978, nearly two decades before the Federal Violence Against Women Act was passed, policies and societal attitudes resulted in the under-protection of DV victims, often with tragic results.

In 1978, then Brooklyn DA Eugene Gold created the office's first sex crimes and domestic violence bureau and I was the most junior member of that team.

At that time, if a woman was raped she had to prove that she had "earnestly resisted" her attacker; and marital rape was legal.

But things began to change, thanks in great part to the advocacy community, including the founding members of Sanctuary for Families, who worked tirelessly to change laws and attitudes, while building a full-service agency to help survivors.

In 1982, shortly after the birth of my first son, Elizabeth Holtzman, the newly elected Brooklyn DA, appointed me as the chief of the Sex Crimes and Domestic Violence Bureau, where a few years earlier, I was its junior member. In retrospect, I may have been a bit young for the position, perhaps lacking the perspective and gravitas that comes with experience, but with the

help and support of my team, I grew into the job.

We did some really interesting things—even groundbreaking—for the time. Rape evidence collection kits were just starting to be used and we visited hospitals and advised doctors on how to collect evidence in rape cases. These kits are still in use and critical to the prosecution (and sometimes the exoneration) of defendants.

With others, we advocated for change in the antiquated rape laws and within a few years, the earnest-resistance requirement was removed and it was no longer legal to rape your spouse.

On Being a Judge

After a few years of heading the Sex Crimes and DV Bureau, I was ready for a new challenge and took over running the much larger Criminal Court Bureau, where I supervised the newest attorneys, most of whom were just a few years younger than me.

The experience was wonderful and I learned a lot. I managed and trained a large staff, interacted with many different judges and court personnel, and addressed individual cases and systemic challenges. After working in the criminal court for several years, I applied to become a criminal court judge. In those days—not too long before I applied—the selection process was mired in local politics. New York City Mayor Ed Koch changed that when he created the Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Judiciary, an independent body that still exists today to help select criminal and family court judges. I was appointed to the bench in 1988 and served for 25 years.

One of the seminal experiences I had on the bench was in 1994, when I was asked to preside over the newly created Midtown Community Court. The court was a unique experiment at the time. It was opened in response to the problem of drug addiction, homelessness and crime in

the Times Square area in 1980s and 1990s, and offered a more humane way of adjudicating misdemeanor cases. The court provided treatment and assistance to offenders rather than the revolving door of offense, arrest and jail. This was innovative thinking at the time. However, critics characterized the program as a “boutique court” that coddled offenders. Nonetheless, it proved successful, still exists, and inspired similar courts nationwide.

After serving for three years at the Midtown Community Court, I became the administrative judge for the New York City Criminal Courts. This involved overseeing a complex system across five boroughs, staffed by 75 judges and 1,600 nonjudicial staff who handled many thousands of cases each year. One of my main challenges was ensuring fairness and coherence across the system while respecting the autonomy of individual judges.

Judges wield immense power; using it judiciously and compassionately is crucial. I often advised new judges to avoid ‘robe-itis’ (a word coined by my husband, also a lawyer), the tendency to become overly authoritatively imperious. I encouraged them to listen, be patient, and respect everyone in the courtroom. My advice was to be the type of judge you wanted to appear before when you went to court.

One of my proudest achievements during my time on the bench was working on the establishment of the integrated domestic violence courts. The late Chief Judge Judith Kaye recognized the need to reform New York State’s complicated (some call it “byzantine”) court structure, where families impacted by domestic violence often had to navigate the family, criminal, and the supreme courts to resolve their cases. Judge Kaye asked me to lead a project to change this system. I worked with my colleagues around the

state, as well as organizations like Sanctuary for Families, to implement this new system.

In an integrated domestic violence court, one judge is assigned to handle a criminal case, a family court case, and even a divorce case if they all stemmed from the same incident. This way, the judge is fully informed about each case that relates to the family. This “one judge-one family model” prevents contradictory rulings from different courts, while making the victim’s safety and well-being a priority. These courts have proved highly effective in managing complex domestic violence cases; they provide a coordinated framework that protects victims while ensuring justice is served. The success of these courts in New York has become a model that is being followed in other states.

Sanctuary for Families

In January 2014, after serving as a judge for 25 years, I was appointed executive director of Sanctuary for Families, which is New York’s leading service provider and advocate for survivors of domestic violence, sex trafficking, and related forms of gender violence. Our work has transformed the lives of countless survivors, offering them a path to safety, healing and independence.

With a staff of 250 and a \$32 million budget, Sanctuary for Families operates using a holistic model of service that provides shelter, legal services, counseling and job training to 8,000 individuals annually. We also advocate at the local, state and federal level for laws and policies that impact on the well-being of our clients.

Our goal is for survivors to have the support they need to rebuild their lives and achieve long-term stability, safety and independence for themselves and their children. Our funding comes from government contracts, foundations, events and individual donors. We are very fortunate

to have diverse sources of support. However, fundraising is a challenge that all not-for-profit organizations face and we need constantly to seek new sources of support. Fundraising is a big part of my work.

Sanctuary for Families' amazing staff go above and beyond to assist our clients, sometimes at the expense of their own well-being. I am mindful of the emotional cost of this work and several years ago hired a vicarious trauma consultant to assist our staff with the toll this work can take on them. The work comes with many successful results, but also occasionally difficult and even tragic outcomes.

Leading Sanctuary for Families has been the most rewarding chapter of my career. I am inspired daily by the strength and resilience of the survivors we serve and the commitment and dedication of our staff.

Insights and Advice

Reflecting on my career, I wish I had appreciated and understood better that the trajectory of a career is long, and that detours and disappointments early on do not necessarily mean that you will not accomplish your career goals. In fact, it can change or inform your goals in unanticipated ways.

Take chances. Throughout my journey, I've tried to be open to change and new challenges. Some questioned my decision to leave a very fulfilling career on the bench to become the executive director of a not-for-profit. In hindsight, it turned out to be one of the best career decisions I ever made. Embracing new experiences can seem daunting at first. But doing so can lead to significant personal and professional growth. It did that for me.

"Go the extra mile" in whatever area of law you practice. In fact, in whatever you do. You may not think that it is recognized or appreciated and sometimes it isn't, but it can reap rewards regardless. You develop a work ethic and standard of excellence that will last your entire career.

Always be courteous and professional. Return calls and emails. Own up to your mistakes and apologize. Mistakes can be great teachers; we just need to be willing to learn from them. "Please," "thank you" and "I'm sorry" are good words to have at your disposal.

Seek out mentors. I am glad that I cultivated and listened to mine who gave me good advice and opportunities to grow professionally.

It is important to practice self-care whatever way works for you, including spending time with people you care about and recharging your battery by taking vacations.

I firmly believe that empathy and kindness are vital in any profession. Treating adversaries, colleagues, staff and clients with respect and understanding.

If you are a leader or supervisor in any capacity, remember that different viewpoints can enhance problem-solving and innovation, as well as create a supportive environment in which everyone feels valued and respected.

Looking back on my career, I've come to see the world in a more nuanced way. I no longer subscribe to the youthful black-and-white certainties of life. Now, I'm more inclined to give others grace in my personal and professional life. I wish I'd learned that sooner.

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