



About Our Honoree

Mary K. O'Melveny



Tonight the Peggy Browning Fund honors Mary K. O'Melveny, General Counsel of the Communications Workers of America. Prior to becoming CWA's General Counsel, Mary worked as CWA's Special Litigation Counsel where she handled a wide variety of litigation, including class actions, on behalf of CWA and the workers it represents. Mary also handled employment discrimination cases on behalf of individual employees in Washington, DC and in New York where she was "of Counsel" to the labor law firm Semel, Young & Norum for eight years.

Mary has enjoyed and benefited from the support and encouragement of family and many friends and colleagues. Her legal career has included work as a labor lawyer and advocate for workers and as a social activist championing the rights of the disadvantaged and those who speak out against injustice.

Throughout her career as a workers' rights attorney, she was lucky to have role models such as the late Judith Vladeck and other trailblazers in the struggle for equal employment opportunity and human rights. Mary first thought of becoming a lawyer at the age of 10, inspired by a friend of her Mother's, who was one of the first women lawyers at the Department of Justice.

Mary grew up in Seattle, followed by rural Maryland and Washington, DC. She received a BA in Political Science from Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland where she was granted a Maryland Senatorial Scholarship. Mary was also awarded a Catherine Seckler Hudson graduate fellowship at American University's School of Politics and Government and



was inducted into the National Political Science Honor Society, Pi Sigma Alpha.

While in graduate school, she interned on Capitol Hill for U.S. Representative Henry Gonzalez from San Antonio, Texas (where Mary was born) and worked briefly for the American Civil Liberties Union in Washington, DC before moving to New York City (Greenwich Village). There, she enrolled at Rutgers University Law School in Newark (known back then to activists as the “People’s Electric Law School”). At Rutgers, she worked as a research assistant to renowned civil rights lawyer and law professor Arthur Kinoy, and participated in Rutgers’ first clinical education program, the Constitutional Litigation Clinic, where her work included legal research for the defense team in the “Chicago 8” conspiracy trial and working on civil rights issues with Bill Bender and Morton Stavis at New York City’s Center for Constitutional Rights. Mary served as a member of a Rutgers task force to design additional innovative clinical programs for the law school, serving alongside future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, then a Rutgers law professor. Ginsburg taught the law school’s first Women and the Law course and was another important role model for Mary.

After graduation from Rutgers, Mary began working for a small New York City firm involved in the social justice and anti-war causes of the era, Lubell, Lubell, Fine & Schapp. There, Mary worked on cases involving members of the Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society, challenging FBI harassment and government persecution, including the infamous FBI counter-intelligence program, COINTELPRO.

Mary’s labor law career began shortly thereafter when that firm merged with a longstanding New York labor and entertainment law firm to become Cohn, Glickstein, Lurie, Ostrin, Lubell & Lubell. At Cohn Glickstein, Mary represented a wide variety of unions, including CWA, the Newspaper Guild, Actor’s Equity and the Writers Guild East.



She also represented the New York Newspaper Guild and several New York Times employees in a Title VII race discrimination class action lawsuit that resulted in innovative changes in assignment and promotional practices at the newspaper, as well as substantial damages for employees and applicants for employment.

Mary was also involved in pregnancy discrimination litigation on behalf of CWA against various AT&T subsidiaries. Mary became the first woman partner at Cohn, Glickstein. Although the firm had only one woman attorney when Mary first arrived, by the time she left, a substantial number of its attorneys were women.

During her tenure at Cohn, Glickstein and later at Lubell & Lubell, a spin-off firm, Mary also developed a specialty in defamation and trademark/copyright law, representing plaintiffs (and some defendants) in a variety of cases. One high profile case against CBS' *60 Minutes* lasted for many years and involved arguments in the United States Supreme Court along the way.

In the 1980's, she became involved in representing social justice political activists whose activism led to criminal convictions. Along with attorneys for the ACLU's National Prison Project and the Center for Constitutional Rights, Mary pursued federal litigation against the Justice Department to force the closure of the infamous "High Security Unit" – an underground federal prison for women political prisoners built in a basement in Lexington, Kentucky. (The struggle to close that prison was chronicled in the award-winning documentary film *Through the Wire*).

Mary also took up the cause of one of those women prisoners, Susan Rosenberg, whose draconian 58-year sentence and repressive treatment for her political activities was a precursor to the Bush administration's blatant disregard for human and civil rights at home and abroad. On January 20, 2000, due to years of work by Mary and others, Susan



Rosenberg was granted clemency by President Bill Clinton and released from prison. She now works on social and economic justice issues for a New York City-based human rights organization.

In January 1989, Mary moved to Washington, DC and was hired to represent CWA in a major Title VII pregnancy discrimination class action case against the former Western Electric Company, replacing its former attorney who had become EEOC General Counsel. That case resulted in a \$66 million dollar settlement for over 10,000 class members, one of the largest such settlements of its kind.

Mary continued to handle similar cases for CWA and its members around the country, as well as other legal matters. She also became a specialist on ADA and FMLA issues, providing training and educational materials for CWA and other clients. In 1997, she and colleague Gay Semel represented CWA and individual workers in FMLA class action litigation against the former NYNEX (now Verizon). The case ultimately settled with significant changes in company policies, as well as reinstatement and financial relief to hundreds of employees harmed by the company's practices.

Mary became active in the American Bar Association's Labor and Employment Law Section in the early 1990's. From 1997 to 2000, she served as the Union Co-Chair of the Section's Equal Employment Opportunity Committee and from 2003 to 2006, she was the Union Co-Chair of the Section's CLE Committee. In 2006, Mary was elected as a Union member of the Section's governing Council, a position she continues to hold.

Mary was also active on the DC Bar's Labor and Employment Section, serving on its Steering Committee from 1991 to 1997 and as its Co-Chair from 1994 to 1997. In addition, Mary was actively involved for many years in the National Employment Lawyers Association (NELA) and its local affiliate, the Washington Metropolitan Employment



Lawyers Association (MWELA). Mary served as a member of NEELA's Executive Board from 1994 to 2002, was Vice President of MWELA for a number of years, working to develop its monthly newsletter in its early days. In 1995, Mary was honored as "MWELA Employment Lawyer of the Year."

Mary was inducted into the ABA College of Labor and Employment Lawyers in 2000. She has also been active in the AFL-CIO's Lawyers Coordinating Committee (LCC) for many years. She currently serves on the LCC Board of Directors, and previously served as a Board member from 1996 to 2000.

In 1996, Mary became General Counsel to the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). In that capacity, she developed training and educational materials on affirmative action, FMLA, ADA, sexual harassment and other workplace rights issues and has worked closely with women union leaders active in the ongoing struggle for employment justice and labor rights.

Mary has also been involved in various community activities, including serving as a Board member and later President of Housing Opportunities for Women, an organization dedicated to the provision of housing for women with disabilities and in recovery in the Washington, DC area. Mary also served as President of the Rural Legal Rights Foundation in upstate New York, and as a Board member of Wider Opportunities for Women, an advocacy group working to establish living wage standards and job training throughout the nation. She also worked with the President's Commission on the Employment of People with Disabilities on various task forces established to implement ADA guarantees. Mary also serves as a Mediator with the United States District Court for the District of Columbia.

Mary has been admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court and numerous federal district and appeals courts around the country. In addition to speaking frequently at legal education seminars and workshops, Mary has authored



numerous law review articles and book chapters on labor and employment topics.

Mary's partner of many years, Susan Waysdorf, is a law professor at the University of the District of Columbia's David A. Clarke School of Law. Mary and Susan (and their cat, Pearl) spend time in Washington, DC and in the New York Hudson Valley region where Mary has owned a home/retreat near Woodstock since the late 1970's.

Mary's deep commitment to her extended family, friends and community and to advancing the rights of her clients has been a source of great strength. In addition, she makes time for tennis, gardening, water aerobics, reading, music and occasional poetry writing. She is currently learning to play the guitar, realizing a life-long ambition. Mary greatly appreciates tonight's honor and the support of so many wonderful colleagues and friends.