On the Bench
Scholarship Recipient Has Distinguished Career as Judge

The Hon. Tatjana Schwendinger, JD ’72, has made her career on the bench, rising to chief administrative judge of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in St. Louis. There she deftly adjudicates federal workplace discrimination complaints.

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—TATJANA AND ROBERT SCHWENDINGER
HEN THE Hon. Tatjana Schwendinger graduated from Washington University School of Law in 1972, the opportunities for women as lawyers in private practice were limited so she found her niche in government. As chief judge of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in St. Louis, she now works to assure that the federal workplace is as fair as possible.

Schwendinger normally supervises four other administrative judges, and together they hear and decide complaints of workplace discrimination from federal employees in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and southern Illinois.

“There weren’t very many jobs for women when my class came out of law school. There were almost no federal clerkships. My colleagues ended up becoming the first female partners in St. Louis law firms,” Schwendinger recalls. “It’s a lot different now. It’s not even comparable.”

Her career path turned out to be a perfect match. “I ended up doing exactly what I should be doing,” she says. “I like being a judge. Not everyone likes it, making decisions. For me, it was a good fit.”

The EEOC’s mission to enforce national anti-discrimination laws also suits her. “If you work, you’re affected by these laws, and I have an opportunity to make a difference for some people,” she says. “That’s hard to beat.”

HER FIRST JOB out of law school was at another federal agency, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), as a staff attorney in St. Louis. She investigated alleged violations of labor laws and took cases to trial if they were deemed to be well founded. She also oversaw workplace elections to determine whether a union would represent employees. “The work I did at the NLRB was as an advocate whereas at the EEOC, I’m not,” she notes.

Schwendinger worked for the NLRB from 1972 to 1976. Then marriage and motherhood put her full-time career on hold for six years. “There was no family and medical leave then,” she says.

She married Robert Schwendinger, JD ‘71, who specializes in health care and corporate law at Armstrong Teasdale LLP in St. Louis. His clients include several major hospitals, provider systems, and medical groups. He shares his wife’s commitment to public service, including holding leadership roles with the boards of the American Diabetes Association and the American Parkinson’s Disease Association.

While they overlapped at law school, the two met not on campus, but at a popular restaurant in the Central West End. They have two children—Kristen, a third-year student at the law school, and Derek, a brand manager at Henkel in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Tatjana Schwendinger understands the challenges of overcoming adversity not only in the workplace, but also as part of her family history. She was born in Holland, the eldest of four children, and grew up in Olean, New York, south of Buffalo. Her mother, Chaya Eichenbaum Teichholz, a Polish Jew, survived the Holocaust with a false Ukrainian identity and menial jobs as a non-Jewish slave laborer in Germany. She ultimately used nine aliases during the war. In 1942, all but one member of her family died as victims of the Nazi regime.

As World War II ended, her mother was working for English forces as a translator in a displaced persons camp when she met her husband-to-be Johannes Martinus Arnold van der Horst. After emigrating, the couple became active supporters of organizations that promote public education, civil rights, religious freedom, and Jewish culture.

Schwendinger’s mother, who had changed her name to Sonja van der Horst, also received Holocaust reparations, which she “carefully invested, but refused to spend,” Schwendinger recalls. Before her death in 2006—her husband had died in 1978—her mother decided to use the money to create an endowed professorship of Jewish Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Tatjana Schwendinger, who benefited from the generosity of others in funding her own education, is committed to advancing her parents’ belief in the value of education. She and her husband are both members of the law school’s Scholarship Initiative Committee and actively solicit classmates and colleagues for scholarship support. They also support a Scholars in Law scholarship for a law student each year and have established a bequest commitment, which will fund an endowed scholarship upon their death. “We are passionate about scholarships and want to ensure students have support now and long after we are gone,” she says.

IN A DIFFERENT WAY, Schwendinger also has been striving “to make sure people have opportunities” at the EEOC. During her 27-year tenure, the number of complaints about age discrimination has increased, and so too have claims based on disability, particularly since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

“The vast majority of cases all involve multiple bases for charging discrimination,” she says, with race and gender being a common combination. Allegations of reprisals or harassment, she adds, are often incorporated into employee complaints.

Unlike most trials, those before EEOC administrative judges are closed due to a congressional decision. The confidential proceedings, she says, benefit plaintiffs and judges.

“It’s very, very stressful to go to trial. It’s easier to get to the heart of the matter if people aren’t as nervous,” Schwendinger explains. “You get the story, and you need the story.”

The resolution of complaints before EEOC judges in St. Louis is swift, compared with the long years it can take for a federal district court to decide a discrimination case. Schwendinger says it typically takes a year or so from complaint to trial. Once they get on her docket, she hears and decides most cases the same week. Still, she has a “huge backlog” of cases awaiting her attention.

Schwendinger has landed in a role where she envisions remaining the rest of her legal career. “It’s an area of the law where a lot is going on,” she says, noting the U.S. Supreme Court decides a major employment-related case nearly every term. “There is plenty I can do staying right here.”