

Michèle Corash Morrison & Foerster



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Michèle Corash wasn't exactly passionate about the law growing up.

"What I really wanted to do was be the second baseman for the New York Yankees. Or an opera singer," she said in a recent interview.

When neither one of those options panned out, Corash opted to study economics at Mount Holyoke College. Attending law school just seemed like the next logical step.

"But then sort of what happened after that was really a matter of taking opportunities as they came along rather than identifying a goal and working toward it," she said.

Corash seized those opportunities, which quickly led her to some of the top legal positions in the federal government. She eventually took that experience with her to California where she established herself as a go-to counsel for corporations facing lawsuits under Proposition 65, the 1986 voter-approved law requiring companies to warn consumers about potentially dangerous contents in their products.

Like other groundbreaking women lawyers, Corash, 66, said she was encouraged to think big about her future career by her law

professors — in her case those at New York University School of Law. She was just one of eight women in her class.

After her second year in law school, she was invited to work with favorite professor Robert Pitofsky on a committee charged by President Nixon with scrutinizing the Federal Trade Commission. She worked under Mark Yudof, who would later become president of the University of California system.

Shortly after graduation, Corash was working part time at Weil, Gotshal & Manges in New York when she was asked to represent a toy company in a false advertising case. The complaint was being pursued by two women lawyers and the company owner thought it would be a good idea to bring in his own female counsel to handle "the two broads," Corash recalled.

The young Corash would pick up some bagels and smoked salmon at a New York deli and then meet the two lawyers in Washington, D.C.

"We would negotiate and then go shopping," she recalled. "I thought that was how it was done."

That was Corash's style. A former fashion model, she never tried to blend anonymously into the man's world she found herself working in. She eschewed traditional dark suits for pink go-go boots and short skirts. That, she said, "all seemed normal. ... It may have had the effect of eliminating some opportunities, but that's OK."

"I think women are different, and I'm proud of it," she said. "And I think we add something because of it."

Lost opportunities or not, Corash's career skyrocketed. After serving as one of three special assistants to the chairman of the FTC, in 1979 she became general counsel of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — a position she was recommended for by one of her opposing counsel in the toy case, Jodie Bernstein.

Corash joined Morrison & Foerster in 1988. She defended the first lawsuit brought under Prop 65 and won the first defense verdict under the statute.



Reflecting on her decades of work, Corash said she's seen marked improvement in conditions for women in law. Women are commonly found in general counsel positions and on firms' executives boards, and all-women legal teams are now accepted in the field, she said. While praising MoFo's diversity efforts, Corash said she remains disappointed that, generally in the industry, women's numbers are still relatively small both in management positions and among the ranks of firms' most highly paid partners.

That's not because the same workplace rules and expectations aren't applied equally between the genders, she said. Rather, it's due to the fact that the measures of success were largely determined when men dominated the field, she said. Under the traditional model, superstars are rewarded; collegial lawyers less so, she said.

"It's still disappointing that when the incoming classes at law firms are almost equally split the partnership ranks don't reflect that," Corash said.

Corash has three bits of advice for other women in law. Trust your instincts. Stand up and don't blend in — literally and figuratively. Don't forget "your sisters" and stand up for them. Corash recalled once being one of just three women on MoFo's 20-member executive board. The women agreed early on that they would insist that board members listen to each of their views and actively consider them, even if it meant stopping the men to say, "Hey, wait a minute."

"My advice is to insist that the women around you and the women you work with be respected," she said.