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Womanpower

By Virginia M. Donohue

Of nearly 8000 men and women who took the last California State Bar examination, fewer than 37% passed on the first try.

Linda Paquette was one of them.

She also was one of the few taking the test who hadn't graduated from law school. She hadn't graduated from college either.

Doing things differently seems natural to Paquette, 32.

At 19, she went to work in a movie theater where female ushers and counter clerks were forced to wear high heels. Linda and her co-workers talked about the unfairness of it.

Paquette did something about it. She reported to work wearing low-heeled "nurse" shoes.

The manager was furious. Paquette's co-workers were delighted — and a walk-out was imminent. The manager conceded.

"I couldn't have done it without the union," Linda said.

A member of IATSE, she had discussed the problem with union friends, who encouraged her. She didn't realize those white shoes would take her on her first step to becoming a union activist and labor attorney.

IATSE hired her as an organizer. Later, she transferred to ACTWU for the J.P. Stevens Boycott; then, to CWA as an organizer.

Law student

Why did she turn to the law in her late twenties? "Partly because I was at the stage in life when I thought: 'Why not?'; and partly because I was convinced I would have been more effective with my union activities if I'd had a legal background."

Paquette attended Peoples College of Los Angeles which "emphasizes the applicant's commitment to the community

rather than a college degree."

But her commitment began in high school. Living in Oklahoma, she witnessed discrimination against those who were "different."

She resolved then to change society, "to make it better." You might say she "got involved": in school government, Planned Parenthood, a delegate campaigning for Muskie-for-President, president of the California Young Democrats, national secretary of US Youth Council, union organizer, executive board member of the Los Angeles Coalition of Labor Union Women, editor of CLUW's award-winning newspaper.

Law professor, labor attorney Jerry Goldman (Levy, Ansell & Goldman), her teacher at Los Angeles Trade Technical College, hired Paquette as an apprentice while she was attending Peoples College.

After two years of law school, Paquette turned full attention for the next two years to her apprenticeship. Then came the bar exam and the euphoria of passing on the first try — after four months of suspense waiting for the results.

Now Paquette took time to reflect on the past and plan for the future.

Sex Discrimination?

Did she experience sex discrimination along the way?

"That's a hard question to answer," she said.

"I know it's easier for me because of what women a generation before me accomplished. There have been times I felt I hadn't really been listened to, possibly because I'm a woman, possibly because I was young. I believe a woman has to be better — not just equal to — a man in the same job. But that's not equality. That's not realizing your self-worth.

"Many women shortchange their self-worth on the job

She made it her way--but it took some nifty footwork

— tolerating sexual remarks or 'friendly' pats or being yelled at by the boss. Sometimes it's hard to say, 'You shouldn't treat me this way. I don't deserve it. It's not fair.'"

The Union As a Vehicle

"The union is a vehicle that has to be used. A car doesn't drive itself. We think of the union in terms of big issues — wages and benefits. But everyday issues are terribly important. If members are abused, they should talk about it among themselves and with their union representatives — use that vehicle to stop unfair treatment."

Corporate Campaigns

Now a full-fledged attorney with Levy, Ansell & Goldman Paquette's focus is on corporate campaigns and strategies:

"Economic pressure is the only thing employers respond to. They're like mules; first, you have to hit them over the head with a 2x4 to get their attention. Strikes and boycotts exert economic pressure. And I'm looking for other ways to pressure them without hurting unions. Corporate campaign strategy is one avenue."

The idea came to Paquette while studying for the bar exam. "Some corporate laws are not being followed, and there's no one questioning them. Why not us? This is something I really want to do — contribute toward developing new tools for the labor movement. I'd feel great about taking a case to the Supreme Court and developing solid law in our favor. I'm still that kid from Oklahoma who dreams of making the world better."

So far, Linda Paquette has exerted her womanpower to make many dreams come true. Why not this one?

See you in court, Linda — the Supreme Court.