

Reviewed by Stacy D. Phillips

The Counselors

Prominent women lawyers share their experiences and remember those who inspired them

The Counselors
by Elizabeth Vrato
Running Press, 2002
\$24.95, 220 pages

Women on the rise, women starting their careers, and women in between will no doubt be highly motivated when they read Elizabeth Vrato's *The Counselors*—and not just women attorneys and political figures but all women. *The Counselors* is an insightful book encompassing candid conversations with 18 recipients of the highly prestigious Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award. In this book, the author examines how these women have changed the world. What's most appealing about the book, however, is how the author encourages each recipient to explore the whos and whats involved in making her life and accomplishments so extraordinary.

Each interviewee shares her struggles, dreams, and motivations. But most important, each speaks of those who helped her in either a negative or positive way. Vrato's incisive interviews

allow their subjects to mentor the reader. In her introductory remarks, Vrato asks the reader to focus on his or her influences and mentors, asking: "Would you have been able to get this far without them? Could you perhaps benefit from more help from others?" These questions, and a sensitive foreword by former President Bill Clinton, address her purpose in creating the book and motivate readers to explore their professional and personal experiences from a reflective vantage point. It certainly stirred me, and I merely intended to critique her work.

Vrato's style is compelling and simple. Although the author is an attorney, she does not write specifically for women of the legal community. The book is a fast and entertaining read. The writer starts by offering a confidential, behind-the-scenes glimpse of what she knows about the subject, how she feels about the interview, and her concerns about what to ask and whether she can address what is important. The author need not have worried, because she does a masterful job of inviting each of these 18 women to share her fears, frustrations, and secrets. By so doing, she certainly made me, as a reader, feel more comfortable in my own professional skin.

For example, she addresses the travails of seeking a career and balancing the constant demands of raising a family. This is a nagging issue for any woman who wants to grow and succeed

in her occupation and experience the joys of motherhood. Her subjects also talk about handling personal obligations to their significant others. In some instances Vrato also gets them to comment on managing a partner's ego gracefully. In other books that chronicle the ascent to professional prominence, these details are often overlooked. Vrato is not afraid to ask, however, and these women are not afraid to answer.

What They Overcame

For example, Lynn Hecht Schafran, the director for the National Judicial Education Program to Promote Equality for Women and Men in the Courts, tells Vrato that she concealed her pregnancy as an employee at MOMA. "I hid my pregnancy with baggy clothes," Schafran relates, and "took a two-week vacation to give birth to my son, and came back to work—a pregnant employee no longer! As a woman at that time, my conditioning was to outsmart the system to get what I needed, not to change the system." I am certain that many women, after reading Schafran's interview, will be able to relate to her professional struggles. Vrato's ability to strike a tone of appropriate familiarity with the reader is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the book.

Former member of Congress Patricia Schroeder shares her feelings candidly with Vrato about breaking into tears while deliv-

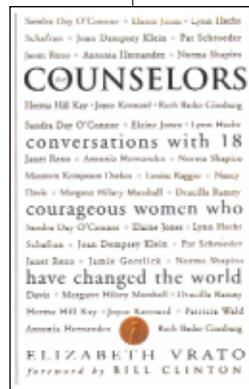
ering her speech bidding farewell to her run for president. "Those seventeen seconds were treated like a total breakdown....I went on with my speech, but it was my tears that got the headlines, not my words," Schroeder confides.

Margaret Hilary Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts and formerly vice president and general counsel of Harvard University, tells Vrato to instruct

her readers to "ignore the 'shoulds' of your life" and look instead at what "you genuinely enjoy doing every day." Certainly this message is a shot in the arm to those of us who need to examine if what it is we do gives us fulfillment and pleasure.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, holds nothing back in her interview. "Firms were just starting to turn around on hiring Jews," she tells Vrato while expressing her frustration about being passed over for a Supreme Court clerkship and not receiving job offers from prestigious law firms in 1959. "Here I was, a woman, a Jew, and a mother—it was a bit much for them!" I found myself cheering her moxie!

As I read the book, each subject became an important mentor to me by offering interesting and applicable advice. In every interview, aside from encouraging the women to share their obstacles and challenges, Vrato asks them to name some of the important



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influences in their lives and to comment on how they provided motivation. Some of these guiding presences were fellow professionals, some were family members, and some were neither. In fact, some were adversaries who spurred them to do great things and some magically appeared at pivotal, life-altering moments. All the mentors were fascinating in terms of how they helped and why these women hold them in such high esteem.

The Mentors

For example, Schafran cites her mother, a brilliant woman who wanted to do great things with her intelligence but who never had the chance to realize her potential. She nudged Schafran into living her unfulfilled dream. Justice Ginsburg also changed her life. Schafran credits Ginsburg with guiding her on the path of law beginning while Schafran was a law student. Schafran also tells how Ginsburg showed her how the same civil rights laws that were aiding minorities could be used to gain equality for women. Ginsburg, in turn, points to her husband, Martin, with whom she has shared a relationship of equality and who constantly and unselfishly has offered her strength and support.

Schroeder points to former member of Congress Ron Dellums, a Democrat from

California and the first African American to be appointed to the House Armed Services Committee. The two found only one chair left available in the committee meeting room, so rather than jeopardize their appointment, they decided to sit on the same chair together. After this politically symbolic meeting, Dellums became Schroeder's wise and trusted friend.

Marshall cites Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy as two leaders whose work had great impact upon her. She also mentions how, shortly after leaving Yale and taking a position in a powerful Boston law firm, she closely observed attorneys in different situations to see what she could learn from them. Marshall states that by observing and studying many of those attorneys she learned to value some of them as role models. Later, many of them also became her mentors. Marshall also salutes Neil L. Rudenstine, president of Harvard, who offered her a position at the university that had never before in the institution's 350-year history been held by a woman.

The most valuable element of the book is that the advice that each subject offers is clear, definitive, and inspirational. Suggestions and recommendations differ, but all the interviewees wholeheartedly agree that without someone to whom they could go for encour-

agement and support, they may never have reached their noteworthy positions.

There should be more books like *The Counselors*. Women in the legal community might like to read a similar book on some of the great women who shaped the history of this country—women such as, for example, Abigail Adams and Eleanor Roosevelt. I would beseech Vrato not to restrict such a book to presidential wives or political figures. Rather, I would be enchanted to see sequels that include similar insights from the diaries and recorded conversations of Amelia Earhart, Susan B. Anthony, and Mary Pickford, to name a few. It would be wonderful to learn about who inspired and counseled these notable women—and learn about those whom they mentored in turn.

The Counselors will leave any woman (whatever her opinions about law or politics may be) highly motivated and inspired. It will also leave readers—men included—pondering their personal history of mentoring. Readers will remember who inspired and helped them in their lives and how they can give and have given special gifts back to others. It seems clear that Vrato would like her readers to come to terms with their gratitude toward those who have inspired and mentored them and to consider how they may mentor others. ■

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