

NAWL award winners light way with courage and persistence

Recipients show professional excellence, selfless dedication as role models and advocates

By Maritza Ryan

'Do you remember how it was on safari? In the afternoons I would send you ahead, to find a place and wait for me?'

'And you can see the fire and come to this place.'

'Well, it is like that. Only this time, I am going first and I will wait for you.'

'Is it far where you are going?'

'Yes.'

'This fire must be very big so I can find you.'

—*Out of Africa*

The 1985 movie, “Out of Africa” has become one of those classic movies that summons for many women of a certain age the romantic ideals of their youth, what with Meryl Streep as a reserved but fiercely independent woman and Robert Redford playing her dashing love interest. Perhaps a less prominent aspect of the film, from which the bit of dialogue, at left, is taken, is its portrayal of the crucial importance of those people who – like the guide, Farah – willingly brave uncharted and dangerous landscapes, shrouded in darkness, only to light a fire for others to follow.

This issue of the Women Lawyers Journal celebrates those extraordinary individuals whose professional excellence and selfless dedication as role models, advocates, mentors and legal innovators, have earned them NAWL’s highest awards this year. In several cases, the awards are themselves named for yet other light-bearing guides who, each in her unique way, worked in the face of overwhelming odds to create a more hospitable personal and professional landscape for women.

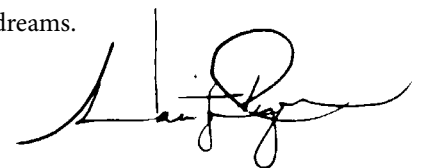
Arabella Babb Mansfield became the first female lawyer in the United States in 1869. Although women were not authorized to sit for the bar, Mansfield, undaunted, took the exam anyway. Not only did she pass, but she did so with flying colors. Never previously known for unbridled enthusiasm, the board of examiners was moved to recommend her admission despite gender, noting that her dazzling performance had “given the very best rebuke possible to the imputation that ladies cannot qualify for the practice of law.” The state of Iowa consequently amended its licensing statute, becoming the first state in the nation to admit women to the legal profession.

Mahala Ashley Dickerson, elected NAWL’s first African-American president in 1984, was also

the first black female attorney in her home state of Alabama and Alaska’s first black attorney. A brilliant and utterly fearless advocate in and out of the courtroom, Dickerson never hesitated to join the battle on behalf of women, the poor, and the underprivileged. “I’m just not afraid to fight somebody big,” she once said. “Whenever there’s somebody being mistreated, if they want me, I’ll help them.”

And, lastly, the indomitable, ever-radiant *Selma Moidel Smith*, truly a renaissance woman whose achievements as a winning civil practitioner and litigator; leading citizen of the bar; ground-breaking scholar with a passion for the history of women in the law; and internationally renowned composer of classical music, among many other accomplishments, are already the stuff of legend. With a “nod to the past” and her “face to the future” – as she observed about NAWL in her article celebrating our 1999 Centennial, “A Century of Achievement” – Smith continues to add luster to her extraordinary record.

The setting for the remarkable exploits of these courageous pioneers, whose names grace the NAWL awards, is not the plains of British East Africa in the 1920s, abounding with prides of lions, venomous snakes and other dangers. Nevertheless, the legal, cultural and political territory in which these lawyers thrived featured perils and obstacles to women’s success and wellbeing of a different kind. We who are privileged to be members of the legal profession realize that the long journey continues still. We are grateful that these lawyers – and all the attorneys honored by NAWL – have built for us very big fires indeed. Clearly visible even at great distances of time and place, they beckon us onward, glowing through the darkness from the farthest horizons of our boldest dreams.



Maritza Ryan is a Colonel in the U.S. Army, and is serving as Professor & Head of the Department of Law, U.S. Military Academy at West Point. She can be contacted at Maritza.Ryan@usma.edu