

INTERVIEW: Mary Cranston Talks about the “Vision Thing”

By Selma Moidel Smith

“One of the 100 Most Influential Lawyers in America” ... “One of the Two Best Law Firm Leaders in the United States” ... Such accolades were given to Mary B. Cranston by the *National Law Review* (2000) and *Of Counsel* (2002). Now, she has been honored by the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession with a Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award, presented at the Annual Meeting in Chicago on August 7, 2005.

Cranston is the first woman to chair an “Am Law 100” law firm, listed by *The American Lawyer*. She was elected chair of San Francisco’s oldest and largest firm, Pillsbury Madison & Sutro, in 1998, and presided over the mergers by which the firm became Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, with 900 lawyers in 16 offices worldwide. She served previously as chair of the firm’s Litigation Department, and her areas of practice are complex class action litigation, antitrust and securities actions, and regulated industries.



Mary Cranston

Cranston was one of the first women elected a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers. She has served the ABA Antitrust Section as an officer and section delegate, and is a past chair of the Antitrust and Trade Regulation Committee of the State Bar of California.

This interview took place at the firm’s office in San Francisco on June 10, 2005.

Is there any particular case that you feel was pivotal in the development of your career?

Very early on, I worked on a massive

price-fixing case for our client, Chevron. It was a claim brought by a number of states that the major oil companies were fixing prices. It was one of those cases that had casts of thousands of lawyers representing each of the defendants, and the states had large teams of lawyers. It was a huge case, and I was a fairly junior lawyer, but it turned out there was a potential counter-claim by some of the oil companies against the state for failure to run the major offshore oil fields in California appropriately. We felt they were manipulating the production in those fields to change the price.

A lot of the senior lawyers in the case thought it was a throwaway, so they allowed me to take charge of that counter-claim. Since it was mine, I gave it my all and really dug into it. We found quite a bit of evidence, and it turned out to be a pretty significant matter. I was able to do early arguments and trial work on that counter-claim as a lead lawyer way before I would otherwise have had the chance. It was ultimately a significant chip in the resolution of the case. That was probably my earliest break. It gave me a taste for being in charge of litigation and having the ability to put together the whole gestalt and themes of the case, which turns out to be something I enjoy.

So this became a turning-point in your own thinking?

Yes, that stimulated me early on to want to be a lead trial lawyer. This was a real breakthrough for me psychologically about how to succeed in law, because it was apparent to me that there were no women models out there in the market. There were some plaintiffs’ lawyers, but not on the defense side—there were no women who were leading the charge—and I think it was pretty understandable. The clients at the senior level were all male, and when those executive teams were thinking about someone to trust with a bet-the-farm case, a

young woman was not exactly what popped into their brain. In fact, I didn't have anybody to model myself after. How would somebody like that behave? So I got onto the whole notion of creating a mental mentor for yourself, picturing yourself leading the charge in the courtroom, picturing yourself being begged by the executive team to take the case.

“If you're willing to challenge yourself and if you're willing to look your fears in the face, and if you're willing to be a bulldog about what you want, you can get there.”

I didn't know exactly how I was going to get there, but I started to read a lot about vision and about how to create change in your own life and circumstances, and so I realized that you had to get a clear vision and you had to look in your own mind to see what little beliefs you had about yourself and what fears you had that were going to stop you—that you had to not try to repress them but pat them on the head and go for it anyway. So I set some pretty big goals for myself.

I wanted to be a lead trial lawyer, and I also realized that controlling a lot of business in a law firm was the ticket to glory, so I set myself these big goals for business development. At that point, of course, I had no clue of how to do it, but I could tell if a small step would lead me in the right direction, so I just didn't give up. It took me five years, but I was able to achieve them, and that gave me a lot of confidence. If you're willing to challenge yourself and if you're willing to look your fears in the face, and if you're willing to be a bulldog about what you want, you can get there. And that really was the ticket to my success as a lawyer. Over time, I did become a very big rainmaker in the firm and was in demand as a lead trial lawyer.

Did you have professors in law school who influenced your direction, or who inspired you?

There were two at Stanford that I would mention. One was Barbara Babcock, who was the only woman professor. Not only was she, or is she, a brilliant intellect, but she is one of the nicest human beings on earth, and she gave all her free time to mentoring the young women. I feel that without her I would have been in an extremely male environment with no one to help us with the difficulties of that kind of integration. Another professor who was quite influential was Bill Baxter, he's passed away now, who was teaching antitrust and was a very brilliant economist. I've always enjoyed economics. That was probably the area of the law that I found the most intellectually challenging, and it turned out to be the path that I followed with my career.

And when you completed your scholastic preparation, where did you apply for a position?

I went into the law firm of which I'm now the chair, so I'm one of those people who's had a very consistent career. In 1975, I went to Pillsbury Madison & Sutro because they were the oldest law firm in San Francisco—the largest, the most established—and they had a tremendous antitrust department. Because of my training in economics as an undergrad and with Bill Baxter, I was put on very large antitrust cases. I was given the assignment of working with the economists and so I avoided a lot of the drudgery of the document work of those big cases and got right into the meat of the substantive issues. That was very lucky, so I enjoyed it from the beginning. I also was able to work with some tremendously talented trial lawyers who helped me a lot and gave me a very good early start in trial skills. One of the clients I worked with from the beginning was what was then Pacific Telephone and Telegraph, and is now part of SBC, so I also developed a deep expertise in telecommunications regulation, especially as it interacts with the antitrust laws. That was how my career got started.

Which of your many honors do you find especially meaningful?

I was very honored to be named as one of the 100 most influential lawyers in America. It had very little to do with me per se. Because of where I've been in my career, I have met many of the extraordinary women

in this country and they are grossly under-represented on these lists. I think it's because we still have some cultural bias in the perceptual field and I was just very honored to be able to stand in the shoes of so many of these women. Every one of us that gets there is sort of opening the door a little bit, so I was really pleased about that one.

I also was, maybe the word is relieved, to be named one of the two best law firm leaders in the United States. I think everyone who takes the top job—especially in a venerable organization like Pillsbury that's been around a hundred and thirty years—is the current custodian. I was asked to take the reins at a time of great change. I was not only nervous about my ability to do the job well and the consequences if I didn't, but I also knew there were just so few women in this position that it would be very visible if I couldn't do it. I was glad to have the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

Who have been your most important role models as women?

My mother, who has passed away, was a truly brilliant woman. When my son was doing calculus in high school, she could help him with his math—he lost me at the third grade—and she was one of the first women to do advanced work in economics at Stanford. She was really bright, and she would have loved to have been in business, but particularly in the social class she grew up in, it was considered a little bit demeaning to your husband to work so she didn't. She just ran all the charitable organizations in town, but she was a little bit bored with what society had to offer her and so she was extremely supportive. You know, many young women grow up with mothers who are quite scared that their daughters are going to go out there and be career women. My mother had exactly the opposite attitude: if you can do it, go for it.

When I got to Pillsbury in 1975, there were maybe zero, maybe one or two, firms in the United States that had women partners, and Pillsbury, I know for a fact, had the very first woman partner in Toni Rembe. She's a retired partner today. And we also had another partner, Margaret Gill. Toni was in Tax, Margaret was in Corporate, and they were very different in their personalities. So I had two really quite different, but equally effective, role models. For women of that

generation who were making it in law firms, if they had a life, you didn't see it at the office, but Margaret had two kids and Toni was married to a very high-powered executive. What they would do was—very much under the table so that it was invisible in the firm—nurture all the women. They would tell us how to get things done. That was such a gift. There was no other law firm in the country that I could have joined where I would have had that kind of help, and I think it made a huge difference in my career.

“My generation was the one that came out of the closet and started saying to the men, ‘These lunches at these discriminatory clubs have got to stop.’ We were a little bit of the in-your-face group.”

My generation was the one that came out of the closet and started saying to the men, “These lunches at these discriminatory clubs have got to stop. And by the way, you need to be very conscious about who you're mentoring, because you tend to mentor those who are like you, but we need mentoring too.” We were a little bit of the in-your-face group, very different from Toni and Margaret. You know, they would actually sometimes counsel us behind the scenes, “Don't do that.” And we said, “No, the time is here.” Eventually, as they saw that it was working, they came out and became very strong advocates. But you can see how the times made them extremely cautious. This was before 1964, before there was Title VII.

Is there advice you would give women who have enjoyed successful careers as lawyers?

For the senior women lawyers, one crying need is for older women mentors. In a typical law firm, there may be 50 percent women associates, but only in the best case 25 percent women partners, and those women get very overtaxed in terms of mentoring. I think that offering to be a very safe sounding board for young women is an extremely valuable thing to do, and that's something that I always make time for.