

Suburban Life

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Oakland County Probate Judge Barry M. Grant, left, chats with Suzanne Dreifus, whose practice of probate law brings her to his courtroom frequently.

JERRY ZOLINSKY/staff photographs

Legalities

Late-blooming lawyer builds dream, practice

By Shireen Rose Iden
staff writer

Somewhere in a hidden place, deep inside her mind and heart, Suzanne Dreifus always harbored a love for the law, a yen to be part of the legal world.

But for long years her life was moved by the pull of other currents.

Anyone who believes it's too late to accomplish a life dream need only ponder the experience of Dreifus who became a law student at 52, a lawyer at 55.

A native Detroit whose parents were also born in the city, she went to the public schools in a northwest Detroit area with the neighborhood kids, considering a career in teaching as many young women did in 1948.

"I went to Michigan State, then to Ann Arbor for a degree in liberal arts, majoring in speech at U-M, and then went to the University of Pittsburgh for a master's in business administration.

"For a while, I worked in advertising, but then I got married and gave up career ideas."

A moment with a family, she experienced the joys of a first marriage and about 15 years later met John Dreifus. The family, including four just-about-grown sons lives in Farmington Hills. Dreifus taught in Detroit high schools and at the Highland Park Junior College (HPJC).

"I always loved my teaching, but

20 years at Highland Park," Dreifus said. "It was an affirmative action thing that's now against the law of the land. My law office was racially based and out of line in seniority."

DREIFUS WAS so devastated she didn't know what she would do next. "I thought my life was over, and

then my husband, John, asked 'What about law school?'"

"As an adult, I thought about the law and had talked about law school. I was having a hard time getting a full-time job. I promised John I would take the LSAT tests and I did."

"The next thing I knew I was a 52 year-old student at the University of Detroit Law School."

It was a heady time for Dreifus who had left high school 35 years before and now was faced with three years of tough law studies.

"Law school is a commitment you had to be," she said. "I started in night school so that I could teach, but then stopped working. I couldn't do both. Out of 70 in my class, 40 finished. It was tough."

"The first year I was totally focused on law school, I didn't go anywhere. It was a strain. Some young people in the class were divorced. I was absent from everything for three years."

Her husband and the boys were totally supportive.

Dreifus said, "law school education twists your brain and changes the student's way of thinking."

"I was set in my ways and it was hard for me to readjust my way of thinking. Also, the testing procedure was difficult for me.

"EVERY DAY, for three years, I considered quitting law school. It was a classic love-hate thing. But the bottom line is, I was hooked. I love the law."

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Walking the halls of the Oakland County Court House, Suzanne Dreifus is really convinced she was meant to be a lawyer.

said Nancy McHugh who can be reached at 658-7766.

CHILD NEGLECT is defined as failure to provide for the child's physical, emotional and psychological needs.

Chronically neglectful families develop through generations of neglect.

The goal of the Family Empowerment Program is to reduce the incidence of chronic child neglect seen in a significant percentage of families in Oakland County.

Though the primary target area for this pilot project will be the city of Pontiac and will be administered from the family center located there, plans call for expanding the project to serve the entire county.

The agency is seeking volunteers to participate in long-term one-to-one relationships between parent and volunteer, proven to be most effective in eliciting change.

Other program needs include tutors, children's group leaders, transportation, and individuals to teach parents home management skills, basic home maintenance and meal planning and preparation.

"Community support is vital to the success of this pilot project."

land County, Oakland County Department of Social Services, the Oakland County Probate Court, the Oakland County Health Department, the Cooperative Extension Service, the Oakland County Child Abuse and Neglect Council, LightHouse, Pontiac Youth Assistance, Baldwin Avenue Community Center and a number of area churches have pledged their support for this project.

MANY PARENTS are trying unsuccessfully to care for their children while lacking the crucial knowledge, support and personal experience of having been nurtured and protected by caring parents during their own childhoods which would make it possible for them to truly "parent."

Volunteers will be trained and professionally supervised to develop a close relationship with a parent. The goal will be to provide caring, consistent support, education and role modeling to each parent in the program.



Suzanne Dreifus, attorney at law, at long last has hung her shingle out for all to see in a Southfield office building. Most of her adult life, she daydreamed of being an attorney, then took the law boards and made it to law school, all after the age of 50. Presently, the Farmington Hills resident practices especially probate law, a field in which she believes she helps children and families.

Staff photo by John Stormzand

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