

SUZANNE BISH

Passionate Champion for Discrimination Victims

by Dave Argentar

“When you’re a fish, it can be hard to see the water,” Suzanne E. Bish says, reflecting on the discrimination and inequities she now recognizes as coloring the background of her happy childhood in Dayton, Ohio.

Bish was a spirited blond girl growing up in an integrated, working-class neighborhood, attending a school still grappling with the challenges of integration. She lived under the roof of a father who was a dedicated mentor to kids of all races. She may not have realized it, but it was here that she first saw the injustice she would ultimately make it her life’s work to fight.

“I never had an aha moment at the time, but reflecting backward, things I might have seen as isolated were actually part of a larger pattern of deeply rooted racism and discrimination,” Bish says.

“A big part of my job now is to shine a light and make these often hard-to-see patterns clear to a judge or a jury.”

A partner with Stowell & Friedman, Ltd., Bish has a passion for fighting discrimination in the workplace and society that has earned her a reputation as a determined champion for employees seeking to vindicate their civil rights. It is the culmination of a journey in which she sought to integrate her professional talents with her personal values.

“It took me a while to get here, to connect the things I’ve always been passionate about with my career path, but I feel incredibly fortunate to be at this firm with people who share that same commitment to standing up for those fighting discrimination,” Bish says.

“We are a family here and have a lot of fun with each other, but to a person, we believe in the people we represent and the importance of what we are doing.”

Linda Friedman, founding partner of the firm where Bish has practiced since 2004, feels equally fortunate to work with someone who matches her skills and work ethic as a lawyer with humanity and humor.

“Suzanne is the heart and soul of this firm,” Friedman says. “She is perfectly suited to represent discrimination victims because of her brilliance, compassion, critical and analytical skills, and energy.”



What makes Bish truly special, Friedman says, is that while she is deadly serious about her work, she can be equally unserious when people need it the most.

“She’s the one walking down the hall singing and bringing a smile to folks or wearing an ‘interesting’ outfit that her daughter picked out for her,” Friedman says. “She’ll be the last one in the office finishing her work, but she’ll be the first one to raise a glass and make people laugh when the work is done.”

Tami Remien, one of Bish’s first employment discrimination clients, similarly considers Bish’s humanity and compassion to be at the core of what makes her so unique and great at what she does.

“When I first met with her, I was vulnerable, doubting and second-guessing myself, and intimidated by an unfamiliar process,” Remien recalls. “Suzanne recognized not only the legal wrong that had been done but also what I was going through as a person. Her kindness and true heart always come through, which is why I still count her among my dearest friends years after my case ended.”

A RUDE AWAKENING

Bish is the daughter of a Pittsburgh-born CPA dad and a Canadian mom who met on a miniature golf course outside of St. Petersburg, Florida.

A passionate sports fan, Bish spent many days with her dad listening to Cincinnati Reds games on the radio or going with him to Riverfront Stadium to watch the “Big Red Machine” during their glory days in the 1970s.

“I was an only child to a father who wanted a shortstop,” she quips.

Bish’s dad not only instilled in her a love

of baseball but also provided her with myriad examples of generosity and duty that laid the foundation for the person and lawyer she would become.

“My dad was always helping others whether he knew them or not,” Bish recalls proudly. “If a neighbor needed help painting his house, my dad would be there brush in hand. He ran a basketball league for kids in the neighborhood. When he passed away a couple of years ago, a lot of young men came and spoke about the positive impact he had on their lives.”

In her diverse Dayton neighborhood, Bish was surrounded by friends and classmates of all races.

“Everyone got along, playing and living together. I just thought that this was how things were everywhere,” Bish remembers.

How things actually were everywhere, particularly for her African-American friends, became more apparent to Bish as she grew older. Bish remembers one high school incident that served as an ugly and frightening example of how the racism that often exists below the surface can erupt in full display for all to see, even children.

“I was riding around Dayton with friends, including two male African-American friends, when a car pulled up next to us,” Bish says. “Out of nowhere, the driver started yelling horrific racial slurs while his young son sat in the back seat taking it all in. I was something of a mouthy teen and yelled back. The driver then fired a gun at us out of his window.”

Thankfully, no one was hurt, but the broader implications of that interaction became more apparent to Bish with every passing year.

“It was upsetting, of course, but at the time I just thought ‘what a racist idiot.’ The

full impact of that incident didn't hit me for quite some time when I realized that racism is pervasive and comes in a wide range, from whispered comments to actual violence."

Bish attended the Ohio State University, where she earned a degree in accounting, with honors, and began to see more of the degrees in which discrimination pervaded society.

"When I got to Columbus, I started seeing more barriers and more discrimination," she recalls, "I met people from smaller, rural, less diverse towns and from more affluent, homogenous areas who had vastly different experiences and views on the world."

RUDY GIULIANI AND RODNEY KING

Bish took her accounting degree and her evolving awareness of injustice and race to New York City, where she started working for one of the Big Four accounting firms. It was enjoyable work, and living in the Big Apple was as fun and exciting for her as it usually is for up-and-coming young professionals.

But Bish also saw more of the inequities that began to increasingly trouble her. She did volunteer work for at-risk youth in Harlem and helped distribute food to the homeless throughout Manhattan.

"You would see kids, seniors, women with hands swollen and charred from exposure to the cold," she says. "It was this jarring dichotomy for me to go from fancy restaurants or events to see all of this suffering just blocks away."

It was also a time when racially charged rhetoric and policies were pervading the city's political climate following the election of Rudy Giuliani. In addition to her other volunteer activities, Bish worked with others to try to capture incidents of police misconduct against the homeless.

In 1992, after about a year in New York, Bish began to realize she needed to change course, to align her feelings about social justice issues with her career in a way that her accounting work could not accomplish. A jury verdict 3,000 miles away finalized her decision.

"For me, the Rodney King verdict crystallized issues of race and civil rights as well as my need to do more," she recalls. "I wanted to do something in my life that would allow me to make an impact on behalf of people like those I knew, who were capable, smart, and committed but were being denied opportunities and were facing hurdles that kept them down either due to race or gender."

Bish saw the law, which had always interested her, as the way to move closer to her goals. She returned to Columbus to earn her law degree.

She loved law school—the Socratic method, the debating of important issues that could have real-world impact—but her acute awareness of inequality also continued to bother her, even in the classroom.

"I would count how many times men were called on more than women," Bish says. "There also seemed to be a lack of diverse perspectives on the issues we were studying."

FINDING HER CALLING

After law school, Bish came to Chicago where she spent a year practicing international tax law at Baker & McKenzie, taking advantage of the firm's support of pro bono initiatives. While she found her tax practice intellectually stimulating, Bish knew in her heart that it was not the kind of practice that drove her to pursue law.

Bish pushed forward, earning a clerkship with U.S. District Judge Elaine Bucklo. It was a transformative and enriching experience for Bish, who emerged with a restored belief in the justice system that had been shaken by what she saw in the Rodney King case and other high-profile matters. She absorbed every aspect of what went on in the courtroom or chambers, finding equal value in observing a routine status call as she did a trial.

"It was a window into how the law works and sometimes doesn't work," Bish says. "Even to this day, when I get assigned a judge in a new case, I will sit in the courtroom for the entire call and watch the way the judge, the clerk, the deputy all interact, how they treat the criminal defendants, the civil litigants, the lawyers, and others to get a sense of what the judge expects."

Bish was inspired by and in awe of Judge Bucklo, who was generous with her time and guidance, allowing Bish and her fellow clerks to get an intimate view of litigation that ultimately pushed Bish forward toward a career in the courtroom.

"Judge Bucklo is just so courageous and always looks at things through the lens of justice and equity for all people," Bish says. "I learned so much from her."

For her part, Judge Bucklo recalls a young lawyer who combined ferocity with friendliness, determination with self-deprecation, and a fierce commitment to justice with fun.

"Suzanne is extremely intelligent, fearless and tenacious in an absolutely positive way," Bucklo says. "She is not only a fighter who will never give up on a cause or a claim, but she is also charming, delightful and fun to be around. I have nothing but praise and respect for Suzanne."

After her clerkship, Bish moved to Sidley & Austin where she developed her skills as a trial lawyer in complex financial and commercial litigation matters. During this time, Bish also developed her relationship with attorney Bryan Wood, whom she married in 2004. The two have a son and a daughter. They remind Bish of the importance of fighting for change, even when the odds are long.

Wood was an employment discrimination attorney at Stowell & Freidman. When an

opportunity arose for Bish to join the firm around the time of their wedding, she jumped at the chance to embark on a new course that aligned with her passion for combating race and gender inequities.

Of course, she had no experience in this area of the law, which was neither intimidating for her nor an impediment to Freidman when she decided to hire her.

"I knew she was making a complete change of course, but I could also tell—especially in retrospect—that she was born to be in this field," Freidman says.

Freidman's faith in Bish was not misplaced. She quickly established herself as a force to be reckoned with, obtaining victories and favorable settlements for victims of discrimination, harassment and retaliation.

While Bish is laser-focused on vindicating her clients' rights, she knows long-term change comes only from workable, practical settlements that include policies and practices which companies adopt and follow.

Bish's successes included several high-profile cases involving systemic discrimination in the financial industry, such as the landmark settlement in *McReynolds v. Merrill Lynch* where Bish acted as nationwide class counsel and obtained a \$160 million settlement for African-American brokers. Making the settlement even more meaningful was that it was finalized in the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington.

The *McReynolds* case was indicative of the traits that define Bish. Multiple adverse rulings repeatedly put her clients' claims in mortal peril. Although others may have thrown in the towel, satisfied with having fought the good fight, Bish would not give up.

"No matter how dire the circumstances or how hopeless things might appear, Suzanne is so creative, convincing and powerful that she can obtain a positive outcome," says Patricia Bronte, one of Bish's partners who has known and worked with her for over a decade.

"She's the one who will keep others motivated and make people laugh to keep their spirits up. She can be supremely silly, but when her killer instinct and intellect come out, it is a sight to behold."

Outside of her practice, Bish is equally committed to issues of civil rights and economic justice, having volunteered with several organizations dedicated to fair housing, civil rights and equal access to educational opportunities.

"We may not be able to fix everything, but we absolutely have the obligation to keep trying," Bish says.

"That's part of the American story, and especially in this era, we need to avoid despair and stay focused on the 'forming a more perfect union' aspect of that story." ■