

## LINDA FRIEDMAN

### Making the World a Better Place for Everyone

by Amanda Robert

Linda D. Friedman was a young plaintiffs' civil rights lawyer when she took on *Biondo v. City of Chicago*, a class action race discrimination lawsuit involving a group of white Chicago Fire Department firefighters who were denied the opportunity to advance as lieutenants.

After 20 years and four jury trials, she helped prove that despite receiving high exam scores, her clients were passed over in favor of minority candidates with lower scores. She grew fond of these clients, who, she says, became victims in the city's botched attempt at affirmative action.

Friedman, 51, founding and managing partner of **Stowell & Friedman Ltd.**, is a strong supporter of affirmative action but realized that what she initially perceived as hostility toward integration was actually the desire for a fair process.

"What I came to understand was that discrimination hurt regardless of the color of your skin," she says. "These men were people who were as equally economically disadvantaged as anybody working in the first rung of government employment. They had one life to live, which was to be a firefighter. They had dreamed of that."

Chief Judge James F. Holderman, who came to know Friedman during the case, calls her ability to analyze complex facts "as good as any lawyer I know." He commends her approach to cross-examination and closing arguments.

"I believe her ability to communicate with the jury stems from the fact that she thinks like an ordinary person sitting in the jury box...on a level that is so understandable, so straightforward, and so credible," Holderman says. "Whenever she comes into my courtroom, I know the case will be handled well and her clients will receive the best representation possible."

Since Friedman and partner Mary Stowell opened their firm in 1989, she has handled high-profile cases involving gender discrimination, mandatory arbitration, mandatory retirement, sexual harassment, and race discrimination. Her firm has recovered more than \$600 million for clients across the country.

While many lawyers spend their time fighting over money, Friedman and her firm



fight to make the world a better place for everyone, she says.

"Every day we wake up, we don't feel this overwhelming sense of dread of going to work," she says. "We feel fortunate to work on cases that mean something to us, that keep us up at night thinking about our clients, and thinking about creative ways in which we can expand the law."

#### Inspired by Early Influences

From an early age, Friedman felt compelled to live a life that made a difference.

Her mother taught at Head Start and instilled a passion for politics and civil rights in Friedman and her brothers, Mike and Rich. She let her children miss school every two years to campaign for U.S. Congressman Abner Mikva, encouraging them to put up signs and pass out brochures in their Wilmette neighborhood.

"She didn't really have a lot of conventional beliefs," Friedman says. "I would bring my report card home, and she would say, 'That's nice, but I don't really need to see your grades to know you're smart.'"

Her mother always followed with, "Do they grade if you are a good person?"

Her father ran his own employment agency, and even though he never missed a day of work, he stayed active in his children's lives, Friedman says. He showed her good work ethic, but also how to laugh.

"If you're going to be a lawyer, you're going to find yourself in extraordinarily stressful times, and it's important to find the humor in the situation to be able to get through the day," she says. "My dad, he could always find something to laugh about."

Friedman graduated from New Trier Township High School and attended the University of Colorado Boulder. A less-than-

committed student, she bounced between majors but graduated with an American studies degree in 1982.

When her roommate's parents offered to buy Rolling Stones tickets for their group of friends if they sat for the LSAT, Friedman went with them and took the test. She was the only one who went to law school.

She graduated from the DePaul University College of Law and served as the first law clerk to U.S. Judge Harry D. Leinenweber in 1985. Previously, she worked for U.S. Judge James Benton Parsons, the first African-American federal judge in the country.

Friedman finished the clerkship and went to work for a civil rights lawyer who introduced her to Stowell, a former assistant U.S. attorney who rented space in their office. They became friends and then opened their own firm.

"It was a good mix, because Mary, since she'd been at the U.S. attorney's office for nine years, had tried over 50 cases and was part of the group of women with Judge Rovner, Judge Williams, and Candace Fabri, who sort of demanded as women to be able to try the more serious cases," Friedman says. "I was a good match for Mary, because I had a passion for civil rights, and I had spent my time in law school and the clerkship doing civil rights cases."

Friedman and Stowell mostly handled gender discrimination cases in the brokerage industry. Their third partner Richard Leng, who worked with Stowell in the U.S. attorney's office, had a general corporate litigation practice.

"I think it probably would have been unheard of at that time for two women to have gone out on their own," Friedman says. "Even though we were in an area that made it easier, because we were in civil rights on the plaintiffs' side, where you didn't really have to compete with big firms or compete with men for business."

## Call for Civil Action

Stowell & Friedman achieved significant results for clients and made meaningful change in several class action civil rights cases, including *Cremis v. Merrill Lynch*, a case that recovered hundreds of millions for women.

"If people ask, 'Do you think you've changed a company like Merrill Lynch?' I always say, 'No, not really, but we did change 900 women we represented who no longer tolerate or take discriminatory treatment,'" Friedman says. "Instead, they challenge it every day, and they become this force within the firm that calls upon the firm to be better."

Linda Conti, one of the eight class action representatives in the lawsuit against Merrill Lynch, recalls that Friedman worked to the point of exhaustion, sometimes negotiating up

to 20 hours a day. She considers Friedman her close friend, who, she says, she sees when she visits Chicago and sends text messages when she hears something funny.

"I think she's one of the greatest people in the world, and not because of what she did for me, but because she's the person that you want next to you whenever you're facing any type of trouble, personal or professional," Conti says. "She's the one you want next to you going into a fight."

One of the firm's early suits was against Rodman & Renshaw, a local brokerage firm that committed gross sexual harassment violations in the late 1980s, Friedman says. Despite no law requiring companies to enforce sexual harassment policies before receiving state government benefits, she and Stowell succeeded in bringing a claim against the firm on behalf of a group of women whose lawsuit encouraged the governor to disqualify the firm from a bond deal.

Friedman focused more on gender discrimination in the 1990s, working with the National Organization for Women to target companies that made employees sign forms that forced them into arbitration if they wanted to litigate a civil rights claim. Her law firm helped compel several companies to eradicate mandatory arbitration and increase representation of women.

"They thought they were sort of immune from civil rights laws because they would force their employees to litigate at their own industry-sponsored arbitration where Tom, Dick and Harry would decide the claim, and they'd always decide it wasn't sexual harassment," Friedman says. "But they weren't lawyers. They were former branch managers who didn't see anything wrong with treating women this way."

In the past 10 years, Friedman has taken on more race discrimination cases, calling them "enlightening and interesting in a way that's difficult to describe." She thought she understood race discrimination, but as she handles these cases, she learns what it means to be African-American in this country, she says.

She also finds that race discrimination cases are harder to prosecute in the courts, because not everyone wants to remove stereotypes or prejudices or even believes that racism exists, she says. In one case, four of her clients, who were African-American financial advisers, were asked by a court reporter to gather more chairs during the deposition.

"I couldn't believe that the court reporter would assume that because they were African-Americans in suits that they were part of the wait staff," Friedman says. "What was

more enlightening for me was to connect eyes with the clients and to have that sense of understanding that this was an everyday occurrence. They started to share the stories as I started to inquire and learn more about what I didn't know a whole lot about."

"I don't think most white people do know," she says. "If you're passionate about civil rights and you want for the world to be a better place, it's an honor representing such an extraordinary group of people."

## A Noble Cause

After 26 years as a plaintiffs' civil rights lawyer, Friedman takes great pride in Stowell & Friedman, its attorneys and its success.

She finds it rewarding to help sustain employment for 25 people who encourage equality and make life better for others. She appreciates that many of the firm's attorneys call on skills they learned as they move out on their own. Two of those attorneys continue to share office space with the firm.

As Friedman and Stowell evolved, they moved from cases involving single plaintiffs and groups of plaintiffs to cases involving workplace policies and issues. They settle more than 95 percent of those cases, since their reputation allows them to be selective, she says.

"We're blessed to have the opportunity to work on what I consider the most significant cases," she says. "By the time someone gets to the plaintiffs' lawyer on a civil rights case, it's not about their personal pain. It's how do you stop this from happening to other people?"

Friedman feels fortunate to work with Stowell, who believed in her and acted as a primary influence on her career and life. She says they formed a "good partnership from the get-go," as Stowell became the older sister she never had.

Stowell agrees that she experienced "quite a ride" with her "wonderfully supportive partner and friend."

"We were in a niche of the law where we believed in the principals of what we were doing," Stowell says. "We believed the workplace should be a fair place and decisions shouldn't be based on someone's race, gender or national origin. What we do, how we earned a living fit well with how we both view the world."

Friedman, who lives near Lincoln Park, spends her free time hiking, boating and gardening. She enjoys visiting her home in Wisconsin and watching the Chicago Sky, a professional WNBA team that she helped start by co-investing with its principal owner and successful female business and community leaders. ■