

## **FAWL Chronicles: A Tribute to Judge Mattie Belle Davis (1910-2003)**

By Wendy S. Loquasto, FAWL Historian

An enormous piece of FAWL's history is gone. I am speaking of Judge Mattie Belle Davis, FAWL's Historian for Life, who passed away on July 3, 2003. She was the epitome of FAWL – its consummate representative. She rose from legal secretary to self-educated lawyer in 1936, when she was the only woman from Miami to be admitted to The Florida Bar. She practiced law with her husband for twelve years and then continued that practice after his death as a sole practitioner until 1959, when she was appointed to the Metropolitan Court of Dade County. As a result of the constitutional amendment in 1973, Judge Davis became a County Court Judge and was consistently reelected to that position until she retired on December 31, 1980, due to the age limitation in the Florida Constitution. She continued to serve as a Retired Judge, however, on both the County and Circuit Bench until June 1996, when she concluded her 60-year legal career.

Along the way, Judge Davis had a tremendous impact. She became an expert on traffic safety issues, having been appointed by President Lyndon Johnson and Governors Askew and Graham to the National Highway Safety Advisory Committee (1967-70) and Governor's Highway Safety Commission of Florida (1971-81). While serving on the National Safety Council (1965-80), she helped develop the Council's driver-improvement program, which has been taken by millions of drivers. (I think it is safe to say that we all know at least one person who has gone to "traffic school.")

Her involvement in community programs and charities was extensive, and she has been recognized time and again for her community service. In fact, the Dade County Board of County Commissioners proclaimed March 3, 1987, "Judge Mattie Belle Davis Day," and the Community Coalition for Women's History named her a "Woman of Impact of South Florida" in 1994. As part of Miami's centennial celebration in 1996, Judge Davis was designated a "Pioneer Judge," and upon the nomination of the Miami-Dade County Commission on the Status of Women, she was inducted into the Florida Women's Hall of Fame in 1998.

Judge Davis was also well known for her extensive activities in various bar and professional organizations. After holding numerous offices in the National Association for Women Lawyers, she became its President in 1965-66. She served almost continuously from 1967 until 1981 in the American Bar Association's House of Delegates, and she is the only woman to have received the ABA Fellow's 50-Year Award as a lawyer who, during more than 50 years of practice, had "adhered to the

highest principles and traditions in the legal profession.” As temporary chairwoman, she presided at the founding conference of the National Association of Women Judges in 1979. The Miami-Dade FAWL Chapter recognized her in 1986 as the “Finest Example of Jurist, Counselor and Mentor” and established the Mattie Belle Davis Award, which is presented annually to “honor the woman who has done the most to promote women and the administration of justice.”

Judge Davis’s outstanding legal career, extensive community service, and numerous awards warrant recognition and honor by all. She has earned a special place of adoration and honor, however, in the hearts and minds of Florida’s women lawyers. I have told the story many times. She was a founding member of FAWL in 1951, served as President in 1957-58, and was FAWL’s Historian for Life. What needs to be stressed now, as we reflect upon her accomplishments, is that Judge Davis did not simply join FAWL, move up the ladder to become President, and move on to other venues. No. Judge Davis made a lifetime commitment to FAWL, and, in doing so, she has influenced generations of women lawyers in Florida.

As I endeavored to compose a fitting tribute to Judge Davis, it occurred to me that a collection of the thoughts and comments of those who have felt her influence would be best. I solicited comments from FAWL’s Presidents and some influential women lawyers and I offer them to honor the memory of FAWL’s one and only, Judge Mattie Belle Davis.

***Dinita L. James, FAWL President 2003-04:*** “The important roles and contributions of women often are omitted from the history books. Judge Davis single-handedly assured that such an omission would not occur for women lawyers in Florida. I was so honored to be present when the FAWL history was unveiled in Miami in January as a gift from Judge Davis to all FAWL members. My personal copy, autographed by Judge Davis that day, always will be one of my most treasured possessions.”

***Judge Rosemary Barkett, United States Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit:*** “Someone once said that we all stand upon the shoulders of others when we succeed at anything, and I think that cannot be more true than in the case of Mattie Belle Davis and women in the legal profession. I will not belabor the obvious: that Mattie Belle was a pioneer as a lawyer and as a judge, that she not only set an example but also contributed directly to individuals and the profession by her pioneer work in organizations like associations of women lawyers and women judges. However, she did much more. She was a constant support to all of us because she never quit and

because she took such pleasure and joy in the accomplishments of others. Her constant presence at all of the events that dealt with women in the profession, even when she became ill, was an inspiration to anyone that might be tempted to give up on a project or a cause. I will never forget her generosity and genuine joy when I was appointed to the Supreme Court of Florida. The best accolade we can give is to imitate. So, I, like others whom she touched, will continue to try to always emulate her commitment and generous spirit.”

***Edith G. Osman, Past President 1989-90:*** “To me Mattie Belle was not a mentor, that was probably earlier in time for her, but she was a symbol, ever present, encouraging us to always keep women lawyers in the forefront. She frequently took pictures of my many swearing-ins and shared them with me later. She relished my winning the Florida Bar Presidency -- she could not have been prouder -- a fact that she shared with me frequently. For the Dade FAWL presidents, she was at every meeting and I think she was at every State FAWL meeting too. Her devotion to FAWL and to the achievements of woman lawyers was boundless.”

***Barbara A. Eagan, Past President 2000-01:*** “I commenced practice in Miami in 1988 and, at the urging of a partner in my firm, became a member of Dade-FAWL and, thus, FAWL. At each and every meeting this fabulous older woman would appear. At times she would address the group and share her insight. That woman was Judge Mattie Belle Davis. As a new attorney, I was so impressed that this person had been a judge in Dade County when there were hardly any other women lawyers, much less women judges. I learned that she actually read the law and apprenticed rather than attending law school to become a lawyer. Her history fascinated me. Through all the years that I was involved with Dade-FAWL, CFAWL and FAWL, I do not think she missed more than a handful of meetings. She was our teacher and our inspiration. I greatly miss her presence.”

***Justice Barbara J. Pariente, Florida Supreme Court:*** "There never was a statewide meeting of FAWL where I did not see Mattie Belle Davis's smiling face. To me, Judge Davis represented all women judges, all women lawyers and the essence of FAWL. She always had a kind and appreciative word for me. That kindness and special smile is something that I will miss - and I know we will all miss.”

***U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno:*** “When I first appeared before her, Mattie Belle Davis was a stern judge who demanded the best of all lawyers who appeared before her. I tried to be doubly prepared when I was in her Court. In the process, I

learned that behind that grave countenance was a warm caring person who did so much to help me and so many others become better lawyers. She blazed a trail for us.”

***Judge of Compensation Claims Judith A. Brechner, Past President 1974-76:***

“I first met Mattie Belle Davis at a legal sorority meeting to which I was invited as a freshman law student at the University of Miami in 1961. I remember so clearly how strongly she supported women in the profession. She was a constant source of encouragement throughout the years. We reveled in her achievements and she in ours.

“When I started law school there were 6 women in the freshman class and only 10 in the entire law school. When I graduated there were only 2 of us left in my class. It was important to have a person of Mattie Belle's achievements, who had earned the greatest respect from her judicial colleagues and the legal profession in general, on our side.

“She was a terrific mainstay of FAWL. When I was FAWL President (1974-76), much had improved professionally for women since the 60's, but there was still a long way to go and Mattie Belle was always there. Her work in FAWL and in other organizations paved the way for the positive recognition and respect women lawyers enjoy today.”

***Siobhan Helene Shea, Past President 2002-03:*** “The first time I met Judge Mattie Belle Davis was at a mid-year State FAWL meeting in Miami. Judge Davis stayed after the luncheon for a board meeting and told the board members that she was working on a publication of the history of FAWL. I had been working on Palm Beach County FAWL's history and Judge Davis encouraged me to document the chapter's history and to send her whatever I wrote. I remember being impressed that Judge Davis was attending the State FAWL meetings and was active as an historian and member of the organization. She was both charming and energetic.

“That was in 1996. As I became more active in State FAWL, Judge Davis was less present over the next seven years, due to her health. However, whatever challenges she faced, they did not stop Judge Davis from traveling all the way to Orlando to help commemorate FAWL's fiftieth birthday at the Annual Meeting in 2001. Then in 2002, Judge Davis traveled up to the annual meeting in Boca Raton to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award, which we began in her honor. Finally, due to the relentless work of Wendy Loquasto, Judge Davis's History of FAWL was released at the mid-year meeting in January of 2003. As President of FAWL, I had the honor of presenting Judge Davis a bouquet of flowers and proposing a champagne toast to Judge Davis, who provided us not only with enduring gift of FAWL's

History, which she composed and published on her own initiative, but with the guidance and leadership of her active FAWL membership, for which we are eternally grateful. We were lucky to have Judge Davis's faithful friend, Henrietta Biscoe, ever present as a travel companion and active FAWL member, at all these events. Judge Davis was always friendly and eager to help FAWL. If you read the history, it is inspiring how active she was in forming FAWL, representing us statewide, nationally and internationally, and how devoted she was to educating the public, lawyers and judges about equality and the law."

***Leslie Reicin Stein, Past President 1991-92:*** "I had the honor of working with Mattie Belle Davis in the development of FAWL's history for our 40th Anniversary Party. It was fascinating to hear her stories about the early days of practicing law in Florida and the challenges she and her colleagues encountered. She was indeed a great and memorable woman and an inspiration to all young lawyers. She will be greatly missed."

***Susan W. Fox, Past President 2001-02:*** "Judge Davis's life set an example. She showed that a single life well lived can influence the world around her. She also showed that by joining with other like-minded people, we can change the world.

"With Judge Davis among us for over 50 years, FAWL had a living witness to the inequalities that inspired its creation. Judge Davis also had the unique foresight to preserve the history of the organization that would otherwise have been lost. She not only brought our history to life, she kept our reason for being alive for us. Even in parting she made sure the memories did not die with her, but left us the history book as her final gift."

**[Insert photo. Cutline: President Susan Fox presented the inaugural FAWL Lifetime Achievement Award to Judge Mattie Belle Davis at the annual meeting in Boca Raton, "In recognition of Lifelong Dedication Towards the Success of Women Lawyers in the Legal Profession June 21, 2002."]**

***Henrietta S. Biscoe, Assistant FAWL Historian:*** "Although Mattie Belle was often heard to say she just drifted along through life, it remains that she helped many others steer a steady course to achievement and success, and she was always so very proud of the accomplishments of FAWL and its members."

***Judge Gill A. Freeman, Past President 1984-85:*** "Being involved with FAWL always involved Judge Mattie Belle Davis. She was always there and there was everywhere. She loved to see us succeed. She encouraged us always to push the

envelope and open doors for ourselves and those who were to follow. In the mid- to late 80's when I became most active in FAWL, I not only attended statewide functions of all types, but I also attended meetings of the American Bar Association, National Association for Women Lawyers, National Association for Women Business Owners, as well as the Business Professional Women's Organization. Judge Mattie Belle Davis was always there. Not only was she there, but she was usually a past president or occupied some other revered title.

“What I remember most about Judge Davis was one special, particular day when Justice Barkett was being invested as the first woman justice of the Florida Supreme Court. Judge Sandy Karlan and I went, not only to celebrate Justice Barkett's investiture, but also to take the occasion and lobby the justices to create a Gender Bias Study Commission. Of course we were not judges at the time, in fact we were barely more than young lawyers. We met up with Judge Davis, who, as I previously mentioned, was always there. When she heard of our mission, she took us in tow, went to each and every Justice's office, introduced us and told the Justice to listen to what we had to say.

“It was quite an introduction and an entrance that neither of us would have had, but for her taking us. It was very clear that the Justices all knew and respected her enough to extend to us the courtesy of the interview. It was not until two years later that we were able to accomplish the formation of the Florida Supreme Court Gender Bias Commission, but our very first effort was made possible by her active support and affirmative action.”

***Judge Maura T. Smith, Past President 1987-88:*** “Judge Davis was the living history of FAWL. She frequently honored us with her presence at lunches and meetings and gave perspective and class to all our gatherings. Every time I saw her I understood that what we were doing was important.”

***Judge Anne E'del Deacon Fenyvessy, Past President 1959-60:*** “Judge Davis was a wonderful role model, whom I admired very much.”

***Adele T. Weaver, Past President 1967-68:*** “When I was President of FAWL I had already known Mattie Belle for some 15 to 20 years. She had asked me to be her Editor of the Women's Law Journal during her term as President. Therefore we worked together frequently and from her I gained my perspective of what FAWL was all about. So I tried to instill the love of the law and the profession in all young women law students, and to the public in general.

“I was a good friend of Mattie Belle's; we traveled together many times – Canada for an ABA convention, and afterwards drove along the St. Lawrence River

and through the Eastern Provinces. We also went to Hawaii together (another ABA convention) and to many meetings across the state of Florida.

“Now for the personal side of Mattie Belle! She had a sense of humor. When we traveled in the state of Florida she insisted on using her car but I had to drive, and as I drove she read the newspaper. Her reading consisted of glancing at each page and as she saw something interesting, she tore out the article and dropped in on the floor for future reading. Eventually there was a pile of clippings on the floor. Once, while I was driving east on Alligator Alley from the west coast of Florida, suddenly there was a terrible noise from the car; startled, I automatically pulled my foot off the gas pedal and looked at her but she didn’t look up – just kept on “reading.” Now the car went along smoothly so I regained my speed – there was no traffic and the highway was meant for “cruising.” Suddenly this terrible noise occurred again. This time I screamed, “Mattie Belle, there’s something wrong with this car.” Without looking up, she dryly remarked “perhaps you were speeding.” It then dawned on me – she had installed a speed device so that she would never be caught speeding!

“About a month before her death, I went to a Zonta luncheon in honor of Mattie Belle, but she wasn’t there – she was ill! So I called her that day and told her I was coming to visit her the next day, which I did! I brought her the program of the luncheon showing on the front the heading “In honor of MATTIE BELLE DAVIS!” She smiled, said “Adele,” and closed her eyes again. After chatting with her friend, Henrietta Biscoe, I kissed her goodbye and left, knowing that was the last time I would see her alive.”

***Debra Weiss Goodstone, Past President 1982-83:***

*What can you say  
That hasn't been said  
Mattie Belle is now gone  
But her dreams aren't dead*

*She led through example  
A beacon of light  
With each first she hurdled  
An invisible fight*

*A model of justice  
A model of care  
Her handprints and vision  
Are left everywhere*

*So for generations who follow  
The road that she paved  
May her legacy be carved there  
And her memory be saved*

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