



LIFETIME ACHIEVERS 2019

MARY JO WHITE

The Tenacity of Morals

BY PATRICK SMITH

EVEN FOR A COMPANY BASKETBALL LEAGUE, FIVE FEET TALL IS A little undersized for a starting point guard. That didn't seem to bother Mary Jo White, who played for The Feds, the Southern District of New York's team, when she joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in 1978.

The key to her success on the court?

"She was tenacious," says Robert Fiske, former U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, special counsel at Davis Polk & Wardwell and White's mentor at the U.S. Attorney's Office.

That tenacity has helped White find success off the court as well. The only woman to ever lead the Southern District, arguably the most important district in the country, White was also appointed chairwoman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission by President Barack Obama in 2013. She is currently senior chairwoman at Debevoise & Plimpton.

Sara Moss, vice chairwoman at Estée Lauder and a former colleague of White's at the U.S. Attorney's Office, says White still has plenty of gas in her tank.

"She's not finished yet," Moss says. "I don't think she is at the end of her career."

It's a career that has spanned more than four decades and is chock full of accolades. But White really doesn't want to talk about that.

"I'm not a legacy person," she says. "I don't think in those ways."

She also doesn't think of herself as a breaker of glass ceilings, even though she has shattered a few along the way. She thinks of herself as an attorney, not a female attorney.



"I don't have that kind of perspective," White says. "I don't think about myself that way. I worked hard, had good opportunities and it worked out."

And not just for her. Fiske points out that every U.S. attorney for the Southern District since White first worked as an assistant in her office. Fiske says it's rare to have even one assistant ascend to the top post, let alone seven. It's testimony to her leadership and the culture she built, he says.

"It was obvious from the beginning that she was going to be a star," Fiske says. "She went on to the appellate section. Those are among the smartest people in the office."

It is no surprise then that her friends and colleagues see her as a whip-smart, tireless worker who, according to Moss, "has a profound moral compass that is unerring."

That compass came in handy when she ran the U.S. Attorney's Office. She led the prosecution of organized crime boss John Gotti, as well as Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman and Ramzi Yousef, the terrorists responsible for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

But White says the case that affected her most didn't involve the Teflon Don or the WTC bombing, but rather a man playing basketball in the Bronx.

Francis Livoti, a New York City cop, had been acquitted of murder after being charged in the 1994 death of Anthony Baez, who had a confrontation with police after his basketball hit an officer's car. The U.S. Attorney's Office, under White's direction, pursued civil charges against Livoti for violating Baez's federally protected civil rights.

"Those cases are hard to do," White says. "Civil rights cases are hard to make."

But she did make the case, and Livoti was sentenced to almost eight years in prison.

It didn't matter to White that the case would be difficult. It only mattered that it was right.

"The moral compass and the deep sense of right and wrong is really core to who she is," Moss says. ■

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG ATTORNEYS?

"You have 40 to 45 years to be a lawyer. Don't do the same thing the whole time. You need to grab those different challenges. Grab as many slices of legal life as you can. Don't be afraid to take the risk of changing jobs."