

# Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future

This series was inspired by Roger Williams University School of Law's annual *Women in Robes* event and was created in alliance with their exciting new project, *The First Women*, which recognizes and honors the first women of the Rhode Island Bar.



Nicole J. Benjamin, Esq.

Taking every opportunity that comes her way is the immediate past president of the Rhode Island Bar Association, Nicole Benjamin's philosophy. This approach has led her on an unexpected journey that began with a chance encounter with the then Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court while Benjamin was in college and has led her to her current role as a shareholder at the firm Adler Pollock and Sheehan and a trailblazer in the Rhode Island legal community.

As a native Rhode Islander studying journalism at the University of Rhode Island, Benjamin originally had plans to become a newspaper reporter. But a serendipitous dinner during her junior year at URI changed her trajectory completely. She had been honored with a Rhode Island Press Association Scholarship and was attending the awards ceremony at the Hotel Viking in Newport. At dinner, she was seated with then-Chief Justice Frank Williams, the keynote speaker. After receiving her award and giving an acceptance speech stating her hopes of becoming a hard-hitting journalist, Chief Justice Williams said to her, "That's nice, but you are going to law school." Chief Justice Williams added that if Benjamin did well in law school, he would consider her for a clerkship.

Benjamin kept in touch with Chief Justice Williams after the awards ceremony, sending him a thank you note for his encouragement, and later covering a story about him for the URI newspaper. After graduating from URI, she took Chief Justice Williams' advice about applying to law school, and, along with a letter of recommendation from him, headed off to Roger Williams University School of Law. She recalls the first year being challenging. Not only was she a student full-time, but she was also selling women's shoes at the now-defunct Filene's. "I literally made flashcards for final exams in the Warwick Mall parking lot," she recalls.

Benjamin performed so well during her first year of law school that then Dean David Logan awarded her a scholarship that, together with a scholarship previously awarded by the Rhode Island Bar Foundation, allowed her to leave her job at Filene's. This made it possible for Benjamin to participate in Moot Court and Law Review.

Benjamin's connection with Chief Justice Williams came around again when he, along with the rest of the Supreme Court, judged the final round of the Esther Clark Moot Court Competition, in which Benjamin was competing. During her argument, Chief Justice Williams kept leaning over to talk to Justice Goldberg, seated beside him. As she later learned, Chief Justice Williams was telling Justice Goldberg that he planned to offer the young superstar a clerkship after the competition, which he did.

During her two-year clerkship, Benjamin was assigned to a high-profile lead paint case pending before the Court. Attorney John Tarantino of AP&S was defense counsel, and Chief Judge John McConnell, then an attorney at Motley Rice, represented the plaintiffs. The case gave Benjamin a front-row opportunity to get to know them and the other attorneys involved. When the clerkship ended, with encouragement from Tarantino, Benjamin landed an associate position at AP&S, where he was a shareholder.

As a first-year associate there, Benjamin found herself craving the same collaborative environment she'd known as a clerk in Chief Justice Williams' chambers. "I really wanted to be part of the team," she recalls. "I'm a big believer that we are all better when we work together"



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Suzannah Skolnik-Smith, Esq. (not pictured)  
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She frequently asked her colleagues to give her more work and ended up supporting Tarantino in particular, leading to a lasting collaboration and friendship with him.

In her fifth year as an associate, before social media took off, Benjamin decided to author an appellate blog for AP&S's website; only the site lacked that capability. So Benjamin took it upon herself to learn HTML to get the blog set up. It was so early in the days of online media that she recalls walking over to the Supreme Court building to take a photo using a "real" camera. After presenting the blog to AP&S's executive committee, she realized the firm could have hired an outside company to build the blog for her. "They all looked at me like, 'You know, we would have hired somebody to do that for you.'" The experience encouraged Benjamin to be less timid about asking her employer for the tools she needed to excel.

Benjamin's work on the appellate blog earned her recognition from peers beyond AP&S, and eventually Attorney Lauren Jones handed off to her the appellate section of RIBA's Recent Developments in the Law CLE program. Years later, Benjamin is still enthusiastic about appellate practice, having argued before the Rhode Island Supreme Court and the First and Third Circuits.

Another aspect of Benjamin's work she particularly values is the client-driven perspective. Benjamin has represented clients in an array of businesses, including aviation, giving her the opportunity to learn about trades she never would have otherwise. "Learning somebody else's trade, whether it's science or engineering or anything else, is very interesting to me," she says, "and something that lawyers, as good learners, can be very good at." One of Benjamin's clients is an engine manufacturer, who invited her to attend a so-called engine school to prepare for a case. "I'm not sure I can build an engine now," she says with a glimmer, "but I can get you close."

During every leg of her career, RIBA has been important to Benjamin, beginning with her early introduction to the RI Bar Foundation as a recipient of its distinguished Thomas F. Black, Jr. Scholarship when she was an undergraduate. As a brand-new lawyer, she joined the New Lawyers Committee, along with the Superior Court Bench

Bar Committee. While Benjamin was a new associate at AP&S, Victoria Almeida, a shareholder there, was serving as Bar president and tapped Benjamin to edit her Bar Journal messages. The experience motivated Benjamin to strive toward Bar leadership herself someday. "Here at AP&S, we turn out Bar leaders," she says proudly, also referring to Tarantino and their colleague Susan Leach DeBlasio. "One of the things that made me want to practice at [AP&S] is their strong belief in engagement in the community."

Benjamin's desire to engage in the community and to encourage other lawyers to do the same is what drove her as Bar President last year. Her goal was to ensure that the next generation of the Bar remains as engaged as the last. With that in mind, Benjamin established the Leadership Academy, now in its second year. The nine-month leadership training program is designed to "foster professional growth and enhance leadership skills," according to RIBA's website. Benjamin says her goal for the program is to create a pathway to leadership within the Bar.

The seeds for the Leadership Academy were sewn during Benjamin's own experience with an organization with a similar goal, Leadership Rhode Island, from whose program Benjamin herself graduated in 2013 and on whose board she served for nine years, chairing it for three. In 2022, Leadership Rhode Island established an award in Benjamin's name, honoring a recipient who exemplifies her leadership qualities. "Listening and elevating others comes naturally to Nicole," Tarantino said when he founded the award. "She focuses less on being in charge, and more on caring for those in her charge." This year Tarantino presented the inaugural award to Reginald Lewis, executive director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership at Seton Hall University.

Another significant honor created in Benjamin's name, also by Tarantino, is the Nicole Benjamin Scholarship through the RI Bar Foundation. The first scholarship was awarded at this past annual meeting.

Although Benjamin has now passed the baton of Bar presidency, she has already grabbed a new leadership role. In May, the National Conference of Bar Presidents invited her to apply for its executive council. Benjamin submitted her application, interviewed, and was elected in August. She will serve a three-year term, providing leadership support to Bar presidents across the U.S.

Benjamin finds respite from her powerhouse schedule at her home in Bristol. "Truthfully, I take very little vacation time," she admits, although she enjoys listening to podcasts from the ABA and the Federation of Defense & Corporate Counsel. Instead of taking more frequent vacations, Benjamin and her husband have made their home their sanctuary, thanks to its proximity to the water. "I'm grateful to live in a place that feels very much like a vacation town," she says, adding that her eight- and six-year-old nieces know her home as "the fun house."

Benjamin's advice is to take every opportunity you can. She offers a sage caveat about burnout and overwork, but she says, "So much of what I've been able to accomplish in my career is because I said 'Yes' to every opportunity that came my way." ◇

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