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## Nicholson inspires others

First black, female Law Division judge,  
WBAI president dies earlier this month

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In her nearly five-decade-long legal career, former Cook County Circuit Judge Odas Nicholson earned a reputation as a dedicated and inspiring trailblazer.

After becoming the first black woman to graduate from DePaul University College of Law in 1947, Nicholson went on to nab the distinction of being the first black president of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois (WBAI) and the first black woman assigned to the Law Division.

Nicholson, 87, died March 10 of complications from Alzheimer's disease. Services were on Friday.

"She was a remarkable woman," said Chicago solo practitioner Crystal B. Ashley, who clerked for Nicholson from 1988 to 1990. "She was a strong, proud, African-American woman who was a real inspiration to me."

Ashley said Nicholson taught her a lot about the law and life during her clerkship.

"I think what I learned most from watching her was to have a lot of self-confidence," Ashley said. "She always carried herself with dignity and strength."

Although the two hadn't been in contact in recent years, Ashley said she never lost track of a 1988 newspaper article about her former boss. The article, which focused on Nicholson's contribution to representing women on the bench, remains in Ashley's desk today.

"It's something I've saved over the years and kept in my personal file," Ashley said. "She was and is so inspirational."

Chicago attorney Andrea M. Buford, president of the Cook County Bar Association, possesses similar sentiments about the late judge.

She regularly appeared before Nicholson, who served as a judge from 1980 to her retirement in 1994. Prior to joining the judiciary, Nicholson worked as an attorney for Supreme Life Insurance Co. of America and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

"As a young, African-American attorney, it was so nice to go into court and see a judge that looked like me," she said.

Buford said she felt honored when the former judge reached out to her years later to ask her to handle a personal legal matter.

"She was elegant, gentle, smart and just so nice," Buford said. "She was a true inspiration to young, female lawyers like me."

Nicholson's knack for inspiring others, however, started way before she joined the judiciary, said Ann M. Lousin, a professor at The John Marshall Law School.

Lousin, who first met Nicholson at the 1970 Constitutional Convention, said Nicholson became "a trailblazer" at age 13.

After her mother died, Lousin said, Nicholson's father let her leave her hometown of Pickens, Miss., to move to Chicago to live with her siblings.

"She could not attend high school because in Pickens there was no high school" that offered an education to black girls, Lousin said.

"When I think of Odas, I think of a 13-year-old girl coming up here on a train to find a better life and what it must have been like for her to have to sit on a segregated train car," she said. "Her story is extraordinary."

Once in Chicago, Nicholson worked her way through high school, college and law school, Lousin said.

Somewhere along her journey to becoming a revered jurist, Lousin said Nicholson lost her southern



(From left to right) Karina Zabicki DeHayes, a partner at Tabet, DiVito & Rothstein LLC and the incoming president of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois (WBAI), talked with former Cook County Circuit Judge Odas Nicholson during the WBAI Past President's Tea in February. Heather Eidson

accent. Lousin, however, still remembers Nicholson's "beautiful contralto voice."

Lousin said Nicholson used to call the roll of delegates to the 1970 Constitutional Convention every morning in her position as secretary of the convention.

"You could hear her in the back of the room and it was perfect dictation," said Lousin, who served as a research assistant at the convention.

During her interview for that position, Lousin said, she visited the Bill of Rights committee and heard Nicholson present a proposal to include the phrase "eliminate poverty and inequality" in the preamble to the state constitution.

Lousin said a few delegates questioned whether eliminating poverty and inequality should be the role of government, but in the end, Nicholson's four-word phrase made it in the preamble.

Lousin said Nicholson can also be thanked for Article 1, Section 18 of the Illinois Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.

She and fellow delegate Betty H. Bergstrom drafted that section, which like her preamble proposal, made its way into the Illinois Constitution, where it remains today.

Lousin said she and Nicholson stayed in touch over the years through their involvement in the WBAI.

Lousin, who spent two years on the board of directors, said Nichol-

son enjoyed attending WBAI events. Nicholson served as president from 1973 to 1874.

Current WBAI President Deane B. Brown, a partner at Beermann, Pritikin, Mirabelli, Swerdlow LLP, said she met Nicholson last month at an event for past presidents.

"I enjoyed speaking with her and she seemed truly happy to be surrounded by past leaders of our organization," she said.

Brown said the WBAI this week honored Nicholson in a resolution, which says the group's former president "contributed so much to the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, as well as to the community and betterment of society."

During Nicholson's time as WBAI president, the bar group voted to allow male lawyers to become members, something Cook County Circuit Judge Debra B. Walker said she didn't know, but doesn't surprise her.

"That makes sense," Walker said. "As the first African-American president of the women's bar, she knew we needed to be inclusive."

Walker, a past WBAI president herself, said she used to regularly appear before Nicholson, who spent time behind the bench as the division's motions judge.

"She was always very friendly and would never insert herself into the middle of the proceedings," Walker said. "She was an amazing woman and pioneer."

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