

A portrait of Donna Kaner Socol, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a purple blazer and a gold necklace, smiling. She is standing outdoors with a blurred background.

Donna Kaner Socol

Trailblazer and Tenacious Litigator Enjoys Challenges

by Dustin J. Seibert

Donna Kaner Socol's high school counselor clearly had no idea what she was dealing with.

It was the mid-1960s, and Socol's Mather High School counselor told her candidly that she would never become a lawyer because the profession wasn't the domain of women. Socol already had practicing law in her sights after devouring hours of Perry Mason episodes.

But it was the discouragement that pushed her over to certainty that law would be her career.

"That was the impetus," Socol says.

Not only did Socol become a lawyer, but she exists in rarefied air as a female founder and partner of a major Chicago law firm, **Hughes Socol Piers Resnick & Dym, Ltd.** And that's to say nothing of a reputation as a tenacious, successful litigator and trial lawyer.

Getting to where Socol is after a nearly four-decade career is a story of expectation shattering, sexism battling, risky decision-making, and many very long nights and early mornings in the office that paid off handsomely. But everyone who knew her expected nothing less.

Finding Her Best Practice

Socol is the only child of Leo, a Certified Public Accountant, and Rose, a homemaker. She says her parents provided her an upbringing that was more sophisticated than her peers: They purchased a pool table for her at age 7—which she used to beat all the neighborhood boys—and a piano at age 8, which she used to win piano competitions throughout the Midwest.

By her freshman year of high school, Socol determined she would either be a lawyer or a journalist. Though her father wanted her to practice medicine, he didn't push his desires on her.

"We talked about it, and he was OK

with me not becoming a doctor,” she says. “Besides, I could do everything in med school except the math.”

After finishing an English degree at Northwestern University, Socol went to DePaul University College of Law, where her love of Perry Mason and her criminal procedure classes shut out any chance of her entering corporate law.

During her last year of school, Socol clerked for Ben Mackoff, chief judge of the criminal division at the Cook County Criminal Courthouse at 26th Street and California Avenue. She used her 7-11 license to work cases with Mackoff and the prosecutors during the day while studying law at night. The position allowed her to meet some of the city’s top criminal defense lawyers.

Following graduation, she took a job with the high-profile criminal defense attorney Edward Genson. Socol says he gave her “the experience of a lifetime,” and he remains a close friend and confidant.

“It was amazing,” she says. “Who else gives first year lawyers experience at 26th and California trying unlawful use of weapons cases, prostitution cases, and helping him with murder cases?”

The 1970s, when mob-related crime was still prevalent in Chicago, helped Socol determine that criminal defense was not for her.

“Although I loved the action, I wound up detaching myself from my clients,” she says. “Some of them are really bad guys. Although they are entitled to a defense, and I fervently believe in proof beyond a reasonable doubt, I just couldn’t see myself devoting my life to the criminal element.”

Socol left Genson after two years to clerk for an Illinois Appellate Court justice, the late Lawrence Pusateri, for a year. The job was transitional, allowing her to strengthen

her brief writing.

She then moved to the office of the Illinois Attorney General. In her role as an assistant attorney general, her work with the Illinois Department of Corrections took her to all of the state’s penal institutions. She visited Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill two days before the 1979 riot.

“After the riot, I decided maybe it wasn’t the best place for me,” she says.

Socol’s next step was to U.S. Steel’s new Chicago office, where she served as lead counsel for all their cases in each of their plants and companies, including Gary Works, South Works and Universal Atlas Cement Company. She ended up taking several cases from the company’s outside counsel and handling them herself.

“I worked on humongous accident cases,” she says. “Sometimes I felt like I was in a war zone with explosions, maiming deaths and things like that.”

Facing Gender-Related Challenges

Socol admits that part of the appeal of working for U.S. Steel was donning boots and a hard hat and going to plants to inform employees how to stay safe. A reporter in the early 1980s wrote an article likening her to Jennifer Beals’ character in the film *Flashdance*. The movie portrayed a woman who worked as a welder in a steel mill by day and danced at night.

The reason the comparison was apt is that both the movie character and Socol were doing activities completely unexpected for their gender. The theme of Socol’s ascendancy as a woman in the legal field was a recurring one, from dealing with that high school counselor until she became too established in her craft to be typecast.

She recalls how she would get looks—and sometimes words—of disbelief from

officers at the Cook County Criminal Courthouse in the 1970s when they learned she was the one who would defend the accused.

“Sure, there were women practicing law, but was it harder to make a difference and be noticed in a male world? Yes, definitely,” she says.

Illinois Appellate Court Judge Joy Cunningham agrees that the mindset toward women practicing law in the 1970s and early 1980s was not nearly as progressive as it is today.

“You really had to have thick skin and let some of the sexist comments roll off your back if you wanted to survive in the world of litigation because it was a man’s arena in the early years,” says Cunningham, who is close in age to Socol.

“When you have a woman like Donna Socol who was essentially on top of the pile in a man’s arena, you know she was better than the guys. She had to be.”

Cunningham, who tried insurance defense cases with Socol, says many of Socol’s courtroom opponents previously fell prey to her after misjudging her based on her gender and diminutive stature.

“No one misjudges her anymore because she’s a known quantity now,” Cunningham says. “In the early years, she had an edge because she had many, many, many wins in cases where people were caught off guard.”

Cunningham was so impressed with Socol’s amiable demeanor that she attempted to emulate it in her own courtroom approach.

“There are many female lawyers who are really hard-driving and as soon as you see them, you get the sense that they’re going to hammer you,” Cunningham says. “She comes across very soft, and it’s very misleading because she’s extremely feminine in

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both appearance and style.”

Laurence Geller, founder and retired CEO of Strategic Hotels and Resorts, a high-end resort owner, and the current chairman of Gellar Investment Company, befriended Socol after they met while running in the park in the 1980s. They have run in many of the same marathons, and he has used her as an adviser in many legal matters since.

He says he didn’t work with many female litigators until the late 1980s and noticed immediately that Socol could not—and would not—always operate on the same plane as her male peers.

“She was clearly different and had to be even more tenacious and diplomatic to beat through the indirect, subliminal, internal and certainly external bias against women,” Geller says. “That separates her from most lawyers, let alone from most female lawyers.”

“Because she had to have that ethic of working twice as hard to solicit business and had to constantly win just because she’s a woman, it made her the excellent lawyer she is today.”

If Socol wants to impart anything to young female associates, it’s that they have the ability to reach her level of success.

“I would like women to know they can be successful in litigation and trial work, and to never doubt themselves, never give up, and have courage and perseverance to achieve their goals,” she says.

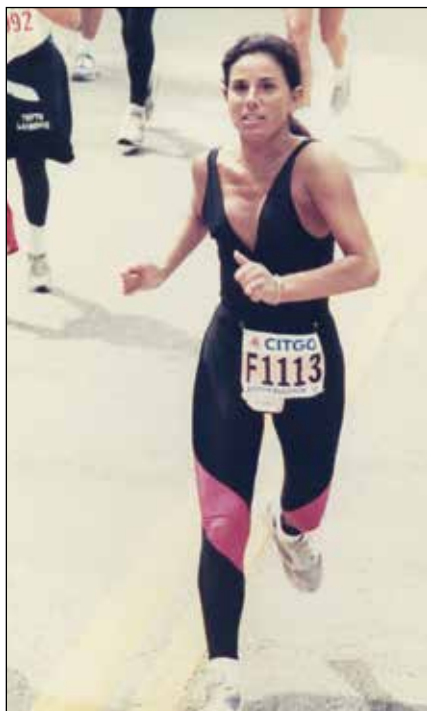
Socol’s Repertoire of Skills

Socol left Rooks Pitts—now Dykema—in 1985 after fellow partner George Gessler, with whom she worked on U.S. Steel projects, asked her to join him in starting up a new firm.

“I said, ‘Really? I’m 31 and I just made partner a month ago,’” she says. “But again, it goes with my personality. It was a challenge. As my mom used to tell me, I always wanted to be independent and wouldn’t let anything go until I achieved it.”

Gessler, Flynn, Fleischmann, Hughes & Socol opened in 3 First National Plaza where it’s been ever since. The firm initially shared space on the 22nd floor with another business before moving to the 23rd. Now it’s on the 40th floor, where it’s been for about 10 years overlooking Millennium Park and Lake Michigan. The gorgeous view was unobstructed until neighboring buildings went up.

The firm started out with seven lawyers as a litigation boutique, “providing service to our clients at decent rates and while building a great practice,” Socol says. It evolved



Socol running in the Boston Marathon.

through the years to become, among other things, one of the top immigration firms in the country.

“We have a group of eclectic lawyers who all have the overriding objective of being the best they can be, and we all get along,” Socol says. “There’s a great collegial atmosphere here.”

Hughes Socol partner Mark Dym has worked with Socol for more than 30 years, since they were together at Rooks Pitts. He says Socol’s biggest strength as a trial lawyer and litigator is her well-rounded repertoire of skills and her incredible ethic of hard work.

“Some lawyers have one element that works for them. She has them all, and that’s why she’s so effective,” he says. “She has compassion, but underneath that very amiable person is a tenacious fighter. Combine that with her voracious understanding of the medicine involved in her cases, and she’s as well-prepared as the experts she goes against.”

A case indicative of Socol’s tenacity and insistence on clenching victory is *Tom Byrne v. Advocate Lutheran General Hospital*. She defended Advocate Health Care against a plaintiff who claimed the hospital’s poor diagnosis and inability to treat his idiopathic intracranial hypertension rendered him blind.

Socol sensed Byrne was faking his blindness, so when she called in an expert neuro-ophthalmologist to examine him, she

asked the physician to stick out his hand for a handshake. Byrne took the bait. In addition, surveillance revealed Byrne in a bar passing out beers as a seeing person would and crossing a busy street alone.

The case was eventually dismissed.

“My instincts were correct,” she says. “He was good...just not good enough.”

Gail Hasbrouck, general counsel for Advocate Health Care and a longtime friend of Socol, has used her as counsel for numerous medical malpractice defense cases over many years.

“Although Donna loves to try cases, she also sees the value of trying to reach agreements without going to court,” Hasbrouck says. “She is very strong in helping to negotiate what is fair on both sides. That’s true professionally and in her personal life.

“She’s a woman to be reckoned with. If she’s determined she’s going to take something on, she may say, ‘I don’t know if I can pull it off,’ and of course she pulls it off with grace, with confidence and with fun.”

Geller says there’s a reason Socol is his go-to adviser in any matters of litigation he encounters, even though he admits she “rarely agrees” with anything he says as a client.

“She’s absolutely, stunningly analytical,” he says. “She’s very cautious, very straightforward, and doesn’t fight the truth in any way. She operates under the ethos that facts are friendly whatever they are, and her advice is invariably correct.”

Becoming a ‘Medicine Junkie’

Socol’s husband Michael Socol—with whom she’s been in a relationship since she was 13—until recently was vice chair of obstetrics for Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine. He enjoys a national reputation for work in his field. Between her husband and her father’s desire for her to become a doctor, Socol has always had at least one foot in the medical field.

“I told my dad at some point I’d represent the healthcare industry,” she says. “I love medicine, I respect doctors immensely, and I believe they deserve good representation because I understand how they devote their lives to their patients.”

She says she became something of a “medicine junkie” following her stint at Rooks Pitts, where she was involved in birth trauma litigation, what she calls her “baby cases.” She also encountered large personal injury cases, including one involving a South Works explosion that severely burned 13 people and resulted in two years of litigation that followed her to Hughes Socol.

For 11 years until 2012, Socol gave a lec-

ture titled “Tales from the Witness Chair” across the country to various branches of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. The lecture prepares physicians to combat potential medical malpractice and to protect themselves from potentially litigious issues. It includes advice on keeping thorough records and information about the entire process of being deposed.

She continues to do grand rounds for Northwestern Medicine and conduct her “Anatomy of a Lawsuit” lecture for Northwestern and the American Society of Anesthesiologists, among others.

“Younger physicians haven’t been through it, so they don’t have a clue what they could be walking into,” Socol says. “They devote themselves to patient care and they hope their patients adore and love them. But in a lawsuit setting, the patient can become your adversary.”

Making a Difference for Many

Socol’s biggest project outside of Hughes Socol may be Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s “Friends of Prentice” program, of which she is vice president and gala co-chair. Friends of Prentice is a fundraising organization targeting projects geared toward women’s health.

For many years she has organized and overseen the annual Navy Pier black tie gala, which features a silent live auction through which the program attempts to raise at least \$1 million. Hasbrouck tells a story of how Socol recently turned a bad stay at a hotel in Mexico into a negotiation for a voucher for a free stay that will be placed in this year’s silent auction.

“That is such a Donna story,” Hasbrouck says. “That’s an example of how she uses her negotiation skills, all while thinking of others, being a lady, and being pleasant about it.”

Though Socol has no intention of retiring anytime soon (“I have way too much work to do,” she says), she hopes that after her final tenacious battle in the courtroom, she will remain a positive example to all aspiring lawyers.

“I would want all young lawyers to accept the challenges that come their way, because we all have dreams, and it is up to us to make a difference where we can,” she says.

“At the end of the day, hopefully I made a difference—for my clients, for my friends, my loved ones and for humanity.” ■



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