

## IWIRC Woman of the Year Speech

Sincere thanks to the IWIRC Board and membership for this honor.

And to Judge Gambardella for her kind introduction. I anticipated it would be thorough – since I've had this experience before – and the last time, most of my speech was gutted by her remarks -- so I planned for that this time, and my remarks will be brief.

As some of you know, I tried to dissuade my nominators from submitting my name -- particularly some male promoters who would argue with me about why I should be the nominee. But I am happy to see two of them here tonight.

Borrowing a line from Jerry Gline's speech when he wondered why he was selected to be the honoree at the annual Bankruptcy Law Section dinner – I too have said to myself and to the two very dedicated IWIRC Board members who called me with the news: “why am I being honored by IWIRC”?

Of course, it is always an honor to be recognized. So when I couldn't dissuade the dedicated IWIRC Board members who do such a wonderful job for this very powerful women's organization {thank you Tara and Nicole, I started to think about what I could say tonight and I want to share with you some very fond memories I have about women in the insolvency practice in New Jersey.

I have to take you back to October 1979, when the Bankruptcy Code came into effect and Judge Gambardella, Fran Gambardella and I were lucky to be among the inaugural class of Bankruptcy Court clerks hired in NJ (I, for Judge DeVito, Judge Gambardella for Judge Commisa and Fran for Judge Hill). At that time, it was no surprise that the bankruptcy practice in NJ (and elsewhere) was dominated by male attorneys. In fact, the only female who occasionally appeared in Bankruptcy Court was Frances Margolis, who is well known to many as a pioneer among women lawyers in NJ.

Fast forward to March, 1985 when the Camden Bankruptcy Judgeship held by Judge Lipkin became available. I was a senior associate at Gibbons (then known as CDDGV) and Judge Gambardella was working for UST Hugh Leonard as his first staff attorney. Unbeknownst to us, Judge Commisa was on a mission to encourage and assist his former first law clerk to seek and obtain the appointment as the first female bankruptcy judge in the District of NJ.

This is leading up to a point which is relevant about IWIRC, but I must pause to say that there are noteworthy male mentors that I have alluded to. They include former Judges Commisa, DeVito and Hill, and UST Hugh Leonard. Another for me was Frank Vecchione, my mentor of 37 years, to whom I was introduced by Judge DeVito, and who hired me at the conclusion of my clerkship. Without getting into some recent events that are a constant distraction, I would like to acknowledge the support of these strong men who were among the pioneers of male mentors who used their positions of power to promote and support women in our profession.

Back to March of 1985 when Judge Commisa was hard at work in assisting our first female bankruptcy judge to ascend to the bench. Shortly after a conversation I had with him, during which he encouraged me to start a female lawyers group, I learned that he had had the same conversation with several other female lawyers – and we were all given the same mission. Following an initial meeting, an organization known as New Jersey Women in Federal Practice was formed – and although I know this from memory, this is actually a quote from an internal memo I sent to women in my firm on March 29, 1985: It reads: “Our primary goal was to endorse Rosemary Gambardella for the position as Bankruptcy Judge and although our endorsement was untimely, Rosemary did get the appointment and we are all happy for that.” Actually, my recollection is that we collaborated on a wonderful letter of support that I signed as WFPNJ President and mailed to the Third Circuit Court of Appeals. But we soon learned of Judge Gambardella’s appointment and it therefore appears that the letter was likely received after the Court had made the wise selection.

By the way, in addition to me, the initial officers of WFPNJ included Dona Bass, Rosemary and Fran Gambardella, Ann Conrey (who some of you may recall later became Ann Commisa), Gerry Ponto and Kathy Suplee.

WFPNJ’s first event was a cocktail reception in honor of the newly appointed Bankruptcy Judge Gambardella on May 1, 1985. Only to be followed by several similar events honoring newly appointed bankruptcy judges over the next 8 or more years, including Judges Wizmur, Winfield, Burns and Ferguson. Although we also honored several male judges as well -- since we were on a roll with hosting wildly successful and profitable parties, we didn’t see the need for gender discrimination.

WFPNJ wisely used its robust treasury to award scholarships to women law students through a committee that included for many years Gerry Ponto and Fran Gambardella.

**Now for the connection to IWIRC** -- which has become the premier women’s insolvency organization not only in the US but worldwide [as you have heard]. I learned from a website search that IWIRC was founded in December 1993 by Selinda Melnik, Lauren Ryan and Martha Fetner, an attorney, investment banker and commercial banker, respectively.

And that jibes with my memory. As I recall, it was several years after WFPNJ was formed when Lauren Ryan reached out and traveled from NYC to NJ to attend one of our WFPNJ member dinners to learn about the organization because she and a few others were considering starting a women’s insolvency group in the City.

The rest is history – IWIRC was founded in December 1993 and, needless to say, Lauren and her colleagues certainly succeeded in a big way. The growth of IWIRC as a robust international organization is proof of that success.

I share this background with you to let you know that tonight’s honor is special to me because of my affiliation with WFPNJ and the history I was part of when IWIRC was in its formative stages. And it is so heart-warming to see how many of you and others across the globe have joined IWIRC and been nurtured by your affiliation with so many accomplished women. It

would put a smile on the face of Judge Commisa and the other men who were among the pioneers of male mentors for women in the insolvency profession.

Again, thank you to the IWIRC Board and membership for this honor and thank you to all who attended tonight's event. Please get home safely.