



Mary Parker (1994-1995)

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Mary Parker: I'm Mary Parker. I am an attorney in Nashville, Tennessee. I've practiced here except for one year being an Assistant DA. I have been in private practice my entire career in Nashville. I started out on the first board of Trial Lawyers for Public Justice, and when- ever it switched over to Public Justice, I stayed on the board. As a past president, I'm on the board indefinitely, no more elections.

Trial Lawyers for Public Justice has just been the most important organization I've been involved in my entire career. That was just an amazing accomplishment. I'll tell you, my dad carried around with him an article about me becoming president of TLPJ for the last period of life. Actually, I was president-elect, I wasn't president yet, but he would show it to anybody that would look at it. That was pretty special.

In 1980 was my first introduction to Joan Claybrook and Ralph Nader. I was invited, along with five other lawyers, to go to a hotel room in Montreal when we were all attending a convention. I heard about this brilliant idea for trial lawyers to give back and

for them to get together to really influence justice in the public sector throughout the country, to do cases that the private bar was not taking either because they were more issue-oriented and there wasn't a lot of money in them, or they were just too big and too much money would be involved to try to advocate for a certain position or certain area of justice.

That meeting -- it was the focal point that my entire career was based upon. And I felt this passion and this commonality of mindset in that room that day with [J.D. Lee](#), [Dean Robb](#), [Bob Cartwright](#), [Bill Trine](#). Here I was, just a brand new lawyer and I got invited into this extraordinary group of well-known established lawyers and became part of this organization in 1980. And It's been an exciting road ever since.

At that time, I didn't want to do anything in particular. I just wanted to learn how to be a lawyer and follow along these great trial lawyers and learn what they had to share. They invited me to be so much more and be a participant in what they were doing.

It was very exciting to me. I'm not sure I'd tried more than one or two cases by that point. And they were saying, "give back." I hadn't gotten anything in yet. In fact, we started out with a lifetime membership being \$1,000 and I couldn't even pay mine all in one time. I had to do it over increments of \$250 each over the course of the first year, but I got it done.

It was [[Ralph Nader's](#)] brainchild. He and [Joan Claybrook](#) were the ones that pulled this all together. Joan, of course, has stayed with the organization. She's been the soul of the organization all these years and but for her -- and she's become a good friend. She's family.

It's just been amazing what this organization has been on a personal level to the people that started in the beginning. My best friend was a TLPJ [Trial Lawyer for Public Justice] lawyer. My first million-dollar case was a referral from a TLPJ lawyer. Everything that I've done career-wise is TLPJ. My son was raised in TLPJ. He went to board meetings. When I was president, he was the one standing there handing out the certificates at six years old.

We spent the next two years trying to get \$1,000 out of at least 200 lawyers so we could open our doors. I started out on the very first board and I've been on the board for the past 40 years. That never stopped. Of that original group of lawyers, every one of them worked their way up and was president -- and then it was my turn.

When I took my turn, we went from one staff lawyer to two around 1994 and our organization was growing. We got a little bit bigger office. At first, we had basically a janitor's closet when we opened up in 1982. We were getting more and more lawyers involved with the organization.

In 1994, I had a great opportunity to learn about environmental law. While I was president, I worked with [Jim Hecker](#) on a case in Tennessee against the Dana

Corporation. It was the Clean Water Act citizen suit. We settled it for the largest amount that had ever been done for a citizen suit in Tennessee and in the entire southeast at that time. Jim Hecker is one of the most amazing lawyers. We have been so lucky to have him as our main environmental lawyer all these years.

I was the first woman president at TLPJ, and I might add, the youngest.

Our Title IX litigation was really impactful. We started that litigation early on in the organization. There was no appellate law whatsoever in the Title IX arena when we took the first case. And we started making law, we created law. Now in the last several years of my career, I've been doing a lot of Title IX work. It's become a big part of my current practice. But for those early days at TLPJ, I'm not sure I would have geared that way. It's the influence of us having done those cases and creating the law that's made me be very interested in that area of law.

When we were an early board, we thought about everything. Now there's committees for everything and the whole board is real genteel.

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So many of our cases made change. Our Title IX made change. Our environmental cases in West Virginia and the Clean Water Act cases around the country. Changing the medical assistance the government would give in cases where people are ill in prisons. There's just so much that we've done. Everything that we take -- the reason for taking it -- is because it can create a public impact -- and we do that over and over and over again.

I think early on, we were really, really careful about taking cases that had a lot of fee-generation that the private bar would take. We didn't want to step on the private bar's toes. We were very careful to take cases with great impact that weren't being taken up by the private bar.

Now I think the majority of the focus is on the impact -- and we are thrilled to have fee-generating cases because it sustains the organization, that has allowed the organization to grow into what it is now.

We had one staff attorney in 1982. We had two staff attorneys by 1994. And now I think we have it over 20. It's pretty exciting to see the organization grow. But we had to worry a little bit more about bringing money into the organization through the cases. So I think

that is probably pretty much, from my perspective, the single most significant change. Otherwise, the attorneys now that are involved are just as passionate or just the same mindset as we were 42 years ago.

There is just so much going on that has so much need for our passion, and our commitment, and our time, and our energy, and our resources to go into protecting America.