



Susan Saladoff (2001-2002)

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Sandy Dumain: I'm Sandy Dumain. I'm the chair of the Emeritus Board of Public Justice, a fairly new entity. And one of our missions is to do our best to preserve the history of the organization.

Susan Saladoff: My name is Susan Saladoff.

Sandy: Your history with Public Justice is unique. Not that anyone else's isn't unique, but yours is quite unusual.

Susan: So when I was a second year law student at George Washington University Law School, I went to a public interest forum in January of 1982, and there were several people who spoke, one of whom was the brand new executive director of what was then called Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. His name was Tony Roisman. And I listened to him and one of the things that he said that just stuck with me was he said, “You can do good and you can do well.”

And I thought, well, that's a concept because I always thought when I went to law school that I wanted to do good for the world, but I also thought I'd have to be poor to do that.

So when he said that, it really intrigued me and he talked about this brand new public interest law firm that had just opened its doors. It wasn't even two weeks old.

And after the seminar, after the talk, I stopped him in the hallway and I said, "I want to come work for you." And he said, "Oh, we don't have any money. We can't hire anybody."

And I said, "Well, I'll get credit for it. If I get credit from school, and I just come and volunteer. And he said, "Well, why don't you call and set up an appointment?" So I set up an interview. And a week or two later, I'll never get this because as I was walking from the law school to DuPont Circle, which is where the offices were, I bumped into him on the street and I introduced myself again.

I said, "I'm Susan Vogel and I have an interview with you in a half hour. And he told me later that he was going to hire me right then and there because I stopped him in the street and had the -- what he would call hutzpah -- the nerve to say hello.

And then I interviewed with him. It was really just three people at the time. It was Tony Roisman, who was the executive director. There was a staff attorney and then there was a secretary, and that was it. And he hired me as their first law clerk.

And I worked there during the second semester of my second year in law school. I did not work there over the summer because I got a job with a big Wall Street firm in New York - for a lot of money. And so I worked there over the summer. I had been offered a job from Skadden Arps, which was the firm in New York for a lot of money. I didn't want to do that kind of work, but it was hard to turn down the money.

I kept coming back to Tony and saying, "I want to come work for you."

And he said, "All right, you want to come work here? You could be a staff attorney." And I was offered \$50,000 at Skadden Arps, and he offered me \$17,500. And I grabbed it. I took the job and I never regretted it.

It was such an amazing learning experience. So I became a staff attorney at what was then Trial Lawyers for Public Justice.

Sandy: What sort of cases was the organization doing at that time?

Susan: So one of the main cases was the Viola Liuzzo case. Viola Liuzzo was involved in the civil rights marches, and she was actually shot and killed by an FBI informant. And Trial Lawyers for Public Justice was bringing a case against the FBI for her death and we had a big statute of limitations.

At the time, the law firm was started to take precedent-setting cases that other lawyers would not be taking to try to push the law in a particular direction. They always took cases that were basically pushing a rock up a hill. I mean, there were very difficult cases and oftentimes we had to create new law along the way.

I brought the first citizen lawsuit Clean Water Act cases. We were already starting on environmental cases. Actually, there was a woman who was also working for the firm who was a scientist. She was helping with environmental cases at the time. This is well before Jim Hecker. And I remember we worked on a case at the Oak Ridge Nuclear Labs. There was an experiment that was happening on children back in the sixties. NASA wanted to determine how radiation would affect astronauts in space. And so it was a ward at this lab, and they had children with cancer and they would irradiate the floor. And underneath the floor were animals, as well, like rats and other things.

We had only learned about it because there was a recent [article in Mother Jones magazine](#) and so we had learned about the case through there. But we also lost on statute of limitations.

The other thing that I was very proud of for myself was, as a second-year law student, I wrote an amicus brief for the Women's Health Network, and we represented them in an amicus in the [Karen Silkwood](#) case.

I was lucky enough to have been put on the team to prep [Michael Gottesman, who was the person arguing the case in the Supreme Court](#). I was on that team and then I went to the Supreme Court and sat during the argument. So that was very exciting. [My name](#)

is not technically on the brief because I wasn't a lawyer at the time. But the first footnote in the brief has my initials SJ V because my name is Susan Joy Vogel, my maiden name.

Sandy: How long were you with the law firm as a staff lawyer?

Susan: I was only there may be a couple of years because I actually wound up getting married and I moved away. But when I did, I then went on to the board, so I became the youngest board member -- I think I was 26 at the time. I was on the board of directors from 1985. I'm still technically on because I'm a past president. I was president I think in 2002.

I worked my way up from being on staff to then being on the board and then working my way up through the positions to the president in 2002.

Sandy

Tell me about what the growth of the law firm was like during that period.

Susan: When I first started, there were very few people. We were in an office that was one floor below Public Citizen. The copy machine was in Public Citizen--so I'd have to go walk up this flight of steps. And that's how I met Joan Claybrook. She was on the other side of the copy machine one day. I looked at her and I said, "I think I saw you on the Phil Donahue Show."

Tony was the executive director for a few years and then Arthur. Arthur Bryant really wanted to come work at Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. He would call regularly and say, "Is there an opening now?" And when I knew I was leaving, I actually called him and I said, "OK, there is an opening now." Do you want to come in for an interview? They hired him to replace me as the first staff attorney.

Then there were probably more than 50 [members]. I mean, there were quite a lot of people. And they were told if they gave \$1,000, they would never have to give any money again. I was fortunate because I didn't have \$1,000 when I was 26. So they let

me be on the board just because of my history. So I never actually had to pay the \$1,000.

But, yeah, they were the best trial lawyers in the country and the most progressive trial lawyers in the country. And I wanted to emulate them. I wanted to be just like them. And so I felt like the luckiest person in the world to be able to go to these meetings and be around people like [Salvador Liccardo](#) and [Leonard Ring](#). Joan was just like this inspiration to me. And, as a young person, at first I was a little intimidated. But then I got my voice and I was able to give a perspective that others didn't always share.

And one of them sort of brought me full circle -- which is I was really advocating for public education around what trial lawyers do and how they make a difference and how the media has been manipulated to share and even believe that we have too many frivolous lawsuits and that trial lawyers are taking advantage of --- all the stuff that large corporate America planted was scooped up and that was being shoveled to and given to the public with large media campaigns and large propaganda campaigns. And the trial lawyers weren't doing anything to really combat that. And that was frustrating to me.

Sandy: There was a little statement on that -- “your premiums have gone up a little bit because of frivolous lawsuits” -- or something along those lines.

Susan: I remember going to my gynecologist for my annual exam and seeing a gigantic poster in her office saying “Stop Frivolous Lawsuits.” The Citizens Against Lawsuit Abuse groups were really just coming up all over the country to promote these mythical campaigns against trial lawyers and the kinds of lawsuits that we brought.

Sandy: How did the staff grow from just you and just Arthur to whatever it was in the early 2000s?

Susan: You know, we started our Environmental Enforcement Project probably pretty soon. That was when Jim Hacker was hired. Development was a big thing. We had development directors that were very important because, at that point, they realized the \$1,000 per board member wasn't going to work. We traveled -- most of the meetings were at the trial lawyer conventions. But at the time, we really thought of ourselves as family. I mean, it was like reunions every time we got together. And we would have so much fun.

I mean, we did really good work back in 1998, which is when I left DC. I was still on the Board of Public Justice. Well, again, were still Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. And so I started my own practice here and brought plaintiffs medical malpractice cases and got I was very successful.

I had made some short films for cases, you know, like "A Day in the Life" kind of films. And I loved the filmmaking process and I loved and learned how effective making films, what showing, you know, video at the time, which is still relatively new, but showing video of my cases and how effective the storytelling was. So I decided to take a year off and I decided to make a documentary film about the civil justice system.

As I was a practicing trial lawyer, everybody said, "Stay away from the McDonald's coffee case. You're never going to convince people that they're wrong and you're never going to convince people that it wasn't a frivolous lawsuit."

And so I started doing some research and I realized that the [McDonald's coffee case](#) was like the most famous case or maybe infamous case in the world. It was all over the world. Everybody knew about it, but nobody knew the true facts. It became the poster child for what's wrong with our civil justice system.

So maybe I could hit this head on and show what the truth was behind the McDonald's coffee case, to show how the system works, not how it doesn't work. And in that moment, it was like, "ding, ding, ding," like a light bulb went off in my head and it was like, oh, the [movie is called "Hot Coffee."](#)

I wanted to attack that case and the media and the propaganda campaign and -- at the time, we didn't call it fake news -- but that's what it was back then. Fake news.

So I wanted the audience to know, "Oh, this affects me, too."

Sandy: Yeah. It was such an important film. I do want to go back to something you said -- in the early days of Public Justice, were there many women or just you and Joan?

Susan: There were some women. Mary Parker. Mary was active before me. She was a big supporter of mine, like really was the one, I think, who nominated me for the board. There were women who were active in the trial lawyer bar who were not active in Public Justice.

Sandy: I'm curious about what your reaction was, if you had any at the time, to the name change it. It struck me that it was in part a reaction to the Chamber [of Commerce] and [Republican Rep.] Newt Gingrich making "trial lawyers" a bad word and that it was better for the organization to get that out of the name.

Susan: And that was true at the time. Trial lawyers were synonymous - not with like, all trial lawyers, just plaintiffs' trial lawyers, which were ambulance chasers, which filed frivolous lawsuits. You know, it's just the whole myth thing. Which is why I made my film ["Hot Coffee"] -- because it was like, OK, let's get to the truth of this. It was because I had grown up in Public Justice that I was able to make this film.

I'm so proud of what we've accomplished and how much it's grown and the quality of the people and the quality of the cases and the impact that it's had on areas of practice.

Yeah, and I was very proud to be President of Public Justice, well, Trial Lawyers for Public Justice in 2002. It was a thrill to have gone from being their first law clerk to a staff attorney to being on the board to working my way up to president. It was just a remarkable experience.