

Marion Toomey Baker

by Gordon Hickey

Marion Toomey Baker, an iconic representative of the Virginia Legal Aid Society, died March 24, 2016, at the age of 100.

Ms. Baker had legendary status at Virginia Legal Aid. Her son Dylan Baker, who is the youngest of five children, said that his mother had stopped practicing law to raise her family, but by the time he was in the 7th or 8th grade his mother “kind of realized it was possible for her to get back to work again.” It was about the same time that Lynchburg opened its legal aid office.

Until then, Ms. Baker was a stay-at-home mother. Her husband, Raymond, was a corporate attorney for General Electric. Ms. Baker, who graduated from the Columbia School of Law at Catholic University in Washington, DC, joined the District of Columbia bar at age 20. During WWII, she worked for the Truman Committee, investigating war profiteers. The family moved to Lynchburg in 1963.

Dylan Baker said his mother started work in Lynchburg as a paralegal in 1974. “She was very nervous about it.” It had been thirty-five years since she had practiced law. “She was also very excited. When she met the people there, she was just thrilled.”

After receiving her Virginia license, at the age of 60 she took a case to court for the first time.

In the late 1970s, President Carter started funding legal aid groups around the country and for the first time money was available in Lynchburg. Ms. Baker came home and told her husband, ““They’re saying I should get a salary,”” her son recalled. So, in 1978 she started getting paid a small salary. But in 1981, the organization was facing cutbacks and she volunteered to stay on for free so that another lawyer could keep getting paid. ““We can’t lose her, she’s fantastic,”” her son recalled her saying of the other lawyer. Ms. Baker stayed on as a volunteer until she retired at the age of 82.

“She really felt she was being paid by being able to do the work,” Dylan Baker said.



Above: Ms. Baker, center, received the Lewis F. Powell Jr. Pro Bono Award in 1994. Attending the award ceremony were Chief Justice Harry L. Carrico, VSB President-elect Kathleen O’Brien, Oliver W. Hill, and VSB President R. Edwin Burnette Jr.
Right: Baker in her office



David Neumeyer, executive director of the Virginia Legal Aid Society, said, “She was a passionate advocate for low-income people. She was also politically involved as a volunteer for the League of Women Voters and Democratic causes.” She also volunteered for Meals on Wheels and read to patients in hospitals, according to her obituary in the Harrisonburg Daily News-Record. The obituary also noted that she was a delegate to the 1984 Democratic National Convention, “proudly voting for Geraldine Ferraro as the first woman on a national presidential ticket.”

Neumeyer added that Ms. Baker “did not mince words and was charming to boot... She was a force to be reckoned with.” She was also known for her generosity.

Ms. Baker was among the three lawyers who received the first VLAS-Lynchburg Bar Association Pro Bono Award in 1992. In 1994 she received the Virginia State Bar’s Lewis F. Powell Jr. Pro Bono Award. “She recalled at the ceremony that she had a crush on Powell when she was a young attorney at the Interstate Commerce Commission in

the late 1940s and Powell was already an ABA leader,” Neumeyer wrote in an e-mail.

Ms. Baker moved to New York City in 1997, where she continued her love of education at the New School, taking courses for retired professionals. In 2013, she moved to the Virginia Mennonite Residential Community in Harrisonburg to be near to her oldest son Greg. She is also survived by her daughter Lisa Horner.

Lynchburg Circuit Court Judge R. Edwin Burnette Jr. grew up across the street from the Baker home. “I didn’t even know she was a lawyer growing up,” he recalled. “She was Mrs. Baker.”

Burnette recalled that Ms. Baker “was a delightful person.” After she returned to practicing law, “She was a very compassionate person and extremely patient with her clients... She was just so devoted.”