

Mobilizing for a Purpose after a Legal Career “Ends”

First female Presiding Judge of a Cook County district Court in 1992; retiring from the bench in 1999; inspiring and influencing **change artistry** everyday—meet Sheila Murphy, shifting the paradigm in Illinois by demonstrating the crucial role and purpose of judges and lawyers as lifelong civil servants within the communities we serve.

Murphy’s work spans service as a Cook County Public Defender, Federal Defender panel attorney, of counsel to Rothschild, Barry and Myers, trial judge, and Presiding Judge of the Sixth District. She brought the first Drug Treatment court in Illinois, opened a school in the basement of the courthouse for children who were expelled, rescued children from the hallways of the courts by opening a huge children’s room. The first Domestic Violence court in the suburbs was opened with the help of 37 Police Chiefs of the area. With the advice of the Court Administrator, Joy Lee, the staff learned about trauma. Substance abuse and mental illness. LAP helped lawyers and judges in need. The Attorney General of the United States, befriended Judge Murphy. Janet Reno provided funds through the Justice Department to send seven Markham Judges to Miami in January to learn how to preside in Drug Treatment Courts. Judges who started out with some opposition changed their minds.

“When things are going wrong, they’re actually going right, and you just don’t know it. If it doesn’t go according to the plans, look at the big picture and focus on your goal, remember we’re all **change artists**, each person can effectuate change.” - Hon. Sheila Murphy

Throughout her career, Murphy got right to work. She advocated for more women to be in positions of power, and for the Cook County Bar Association to have defense of prisoners’ opportunities.

While it is easy to focus on the wins, as an Associate Judge in Domestic Violence court, Murphy recalls she was faced with significant opposition to her diverse thinking. After identifying the need for a children’s room in the Domestic Violence, courthouse, Murphy stepped up installing a room for children to play in when required to be at the courthouse. A judicial supervisor told her to stop work on the children’s room, “You’re not a social worker” he remarked. When she continued the effort, Murphy was swiftly re-assigned to Traffic Court. Meeting resistance with integrity, grace, and determination, sometimes means picking your battles, arming yourself with the ability to adapt within the circumstances and practice patient resiliency. Later Murphy, was rescued by another woman, Laurel Bellows who objected. She was transferred to chancery. Today, her story is an example of remarkable character and sharp intellect in her decision to save this battle for future change.

Today Murphy champions her days with a natural bold and wise attitude, her work never ends. After observing the progressive structure of the [Red Hook Community Justice Center](#) in Brooklyn, New York, Murphy is now working to develop new resources and attitudes within the Illinois court system. She teaches Restorative Justice with Professor Michael Seng at John Marshall Law School and is Co-Chair of the Restorative Justice Project. Seng and Murphy also edited a law book, “Restorative Practices...A Holistic Approach.”

Taking the time to proactively think through the framework a Judge is setting up for an individual within his/her sentence can mean the difference between life and death. For example, providing tennis shoes

is an easy way to improve morale and balance behaviorisms by encouraging naturally occurring endorphins associated with cardio exercise. A **change artist**, Murphy is always asking how we can do better for those we serve. A JMLS student, asked the Judge at Red Hook what they would do if a sentencing solution isn't working, a failed drug test for example. The Judge responded "that means I'm doing something wrong, I need to reassess my approach." Murphy vivaciously declares, "This is the attitude we need in the courts, on the streets, in the attorney's office, and at the social services desk, THIS is how we effectuate change. Kindness creates change. Fear creates violence."

Change is possible no matter what you do. YOU can effectuate change, YOU can be a **change artist** in your own community. But it's important to start with yourself first. You never know where your message will go or who will receive it. If you're not ready or unsure if you're ready to be a catalyst for change in your community, you've got a resource in LAP!

LAP provides resources and support to help judges, attorneys, and law students – the only entity that provides cost-free, confidential counseling for attorneys by attorneys. Sheila Murphy has been a LAP member since the '80s and serves on the Board by appointment of the Illinois Supreme Court.

No individual will end their legal career unaffected by wellness issues. We need to help each other and create a community of **change artists** – lucky for us that community is grounded in LAP. Check [us out online](#) or give us a call 312-726-6607 to hear about what's happening at LAP!