

MONARCH

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

DEBORAH WATERS '85

CLEARs GENDER HURDLES

IN MARITIME LAW

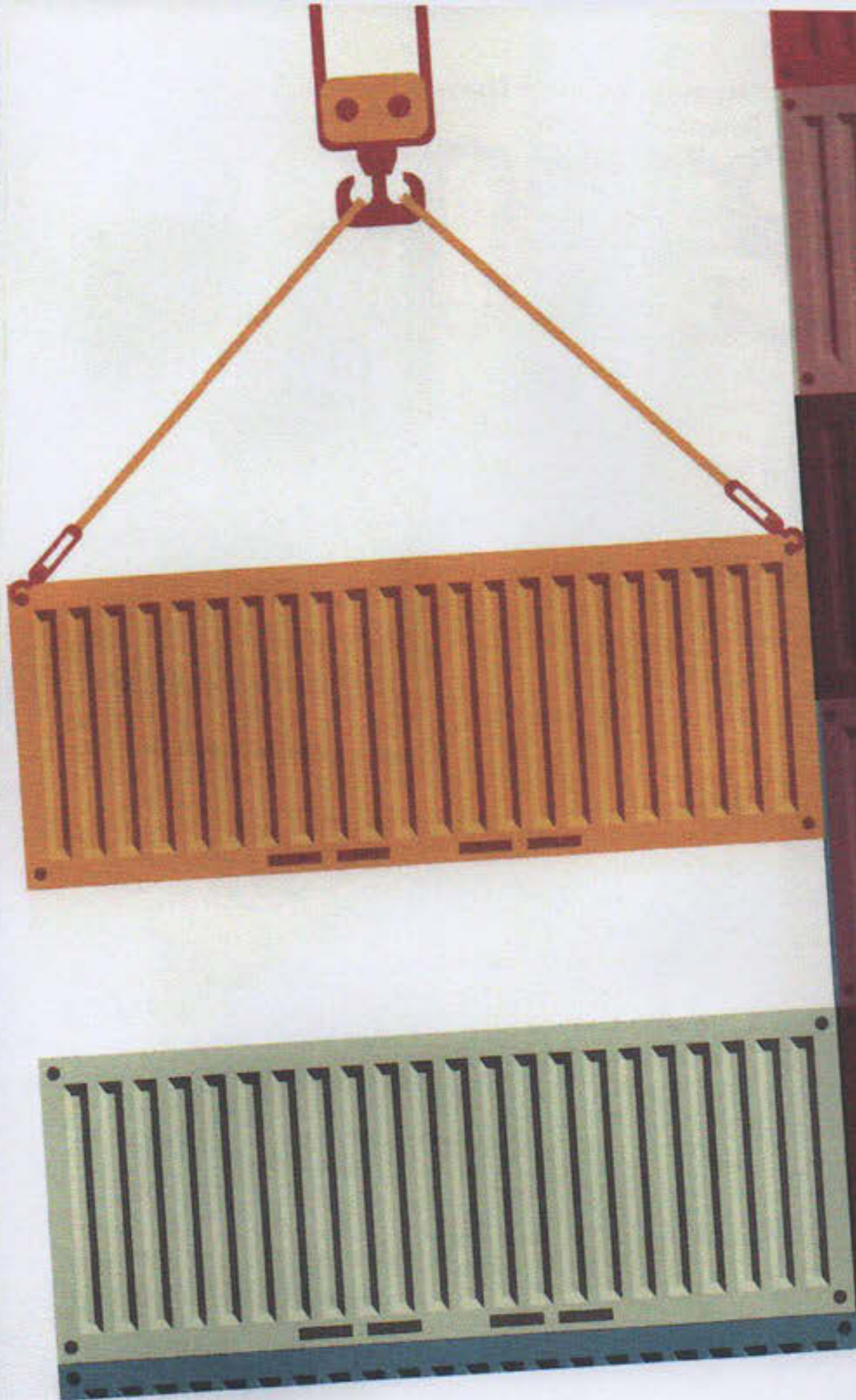


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BREAK

AS A WOMAN IN MARITIME LAW

BY MICHAEL KNEPLER

From teacher's aide to secretary to paralegal, and then becoming one of the few women attorneys to specialize in maritime law, Deborah C. Waters '85 has sailed an uncharted course in a legal career that spanned the United States and carried her to several foreign countries.

And she's still forging into new directions as the only and perhaps first maritime lawyer serving on the Virginia Port Authority's Board of Commissioners.

"From being the granddaughter of a farmer in Chesapeake to being one of 13 members of the board, this is probably the biggest accomplishment I've had," Waters said. "The whole

region depends on our port. You can't go over a bridge without seeing the ships and tugboats and barges and Navy ships going through our rivers, in and out of our harbor. I want to do a really good job."

From the big windows in her sixth-floor office in the Town Point Center building in downtown Norfolk, Waters enjoys a daily parade of vessels plying the Elizabeth River. A shared conference room on a higher floor allows an even better view that includes the rows of towering container cranes at the port's Norfolk International Terminals facility.

"When I realized that I can see the marine terminal," Waters said, "I knew this is where I wanted to be."

But getting there from a rural corner of Chesapeake to ODU to

eventually starting her own law firm, Waters Law, in March 2011 has been a rare journey.

Deborah Culpepper Waters grew up on family farmland in what is now the suburbanized Western Branch section of Chesapeake. Graduating from Western Branch High School, she left for Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond but, in 1972, dropped out to marry her high school sweetheart, Louis M. Waters, who was attending Virginia Tech.

"After our first year of college, we couldn't stand being apart," said Waters, who was 19 at the time.

The couple started a family but also decided that Louis would return to college first, attending ODU. He received a bachelor's in 1982 while working part time at an iron foundry in Norfolk.

ING THROUGH

VIRGINIA PORT AUTHORITY'S
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
IS LATEST STOP FOR
DEBORAH WATERS '85





Deborah also worked, first as a teacher's aide for her aunt at Western Branch Junior High School, but then discovering that she needed to earn more money to help support the family.

The realization led to Deborah Waters' first step to becoming a lawyer. She took a secretarial job with her husband's brother-in-law, David W. Bouchard, who had just opened his law practice.

"I just loved it so much," Waters recalled. "It was so interesting and fun, but it also was such a challenge that I thought it was just really, really great. That was my introduction to the law that I love so much to this very day."

Soon it was her turn to go back to college, and Waters now interested in law school enrolled at ODU as a political science major as a way to prepare. John Ramsey, now retired, was her favorite professor because, she said, "he didn't mollycoddle us at all. He made us think, made us analyze, made us pay attention, and I just loved him."

Ramsey also directed ODU's new at the time paralegal studies program, which would award a certificate in addition to the bachelor's degree. Waters, then 30, was selected to be among the program's first 20 students and was quoted in *The ODU Courier* as saying: "Working as a paralegal will be a point in my favor when I apply to law school. It shows that I am interested, that I have the drive and that this is the field I want to stay in."

Waters, said Ramsey, helped set up parts of the paralegal program and "gave me a lot of good advice" based on her practical experience working for lawyers. The retired professor still remembers Waters as hardworking, a first-rate student, ambitious, motivated, outspoken and straightforward.

"I guarantee you, she could hold her own but was not obtrusive about it. She told it like it was and didn't back off," Ramsey said.

Waters also proved her determination by landing a 30-hour-a-week paralegal job with a Norfolk law firm while still enrolled at ODU and raising two small children. "The firm let me work a flex schedule," she said. "I

"IT'S A VERY ROMANTIC KIND OF LAW. IT'S THE LAW OF THE SEA THAT GOES ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE PHOENICIANS."

would take as many 8 o'clock classes as I possibly could, which almost killed me, and then as many night classes as I could. But they also let me work around my college schedule."

Waters typed real estate closings at home, but she also got her first taste of maritime personal injury cases and began meeting leaders of the International Longshoremen's Association. She was hooked, and she became focused on maritime law as she entered William & Mary's Marshall-Wythe School of Law in 1985.

"Maritime law. That's absolutely what I wanted to do from then on," Waters said. "It's a very romantic kind of law. It's the law of the sea that goes all the way back to the Phoenicians, not just hundreds of years ago but thousands."

Not every member of the law school faculty shared her enthusiasm.

"Let's just say I was discouraged about going into maritime law because, some people would say, 'It's a man's world' and 'a rough world, my dear.'" Waters recounted. "But, of course, I'm pretty hard-headed."

Over the years, Waters has mentored other female attorneys and has been involved in several gender-equity lawsuits, including a federal case that resulted in the Virginia High School League changing its rules to enhance equality for girls playing sports.

After graduating Marshall-Wythe in 1988, Waters worked for several law firms and accumulated more experience in maritime and labor law specialties, as well as in other fields. She also has received many honors and recognitions, including being admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court, becoming a Board of Governors member of the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association, becoming the first woman to chair the male-dominated Admiralty and Maritime Law Section of the American Association for Justice (formerly the Association of Trial Lawyers of America) and receiving a Most Influential Women of Virginia Award in 2014 from Virginia Lawyer's Weekly and Virginia Medical Weekly.

In addition, Waters has been assisting the plaintiffs in the disastrous 2010 BP oil spill as one of seven members – and the only woman – on the special Limitation and Maritime Law Committee.

"She has made quite a reputation for herself," said James S. Mathews, an ODU adjunct professor of criminal justice and a retired Norfolk General District Court judge, who previously practiced admiralty law.



Waters also combines her maritime law specialty with her strong interest in labor law as general counsel to the International Longshoremen's Association in Virginia and counts the late union leader Edward L. Brown Sr. among her mentors. "He set the tone of labor relations for the ports in Virginia," she said. "He went from being adversarial to cooperative. He believed and I agree with him a thousand percent that if the port thrives, the union and its members will thrive. ... His saying was to 'Try to end up in the middle of the couch.'"

Her practice also includes representing men and women who get hurt working aboard ships, from barges and tugboats to huge transoceanic vessels. "It's a whole other world, and it's global," Waters said. "And that's what really makes it fun."

Despite her connections with labor, Waters has insisted that she doesn't represent any group or organization as a Virginia Port Authority commissioner.

"I really care about our port and I want it to thrive and succeed, and I think we are positioned for an explosion in business at the port," she said. "And all of this is good for the overall economy of Virginia."

She's also fascinated by the workings of the port, especially the critical timing issues that involve the arrival and departure of vessels and cargo transfers with trucks. "It's a complex business with a lot of moving parts, which makes it fun but also makes it challenging," Waters said. "The port has to work well for all of us. It's the crown jewel of our commonwealth." 