

Lila M. Neuenfelt

Lewiston

Michigan

1902

1981

Five Achievements:

Lila M. Neuenfelt was a trailblazing jurist in Michigan legal history.

1. Judge Neuenfelt was the first female circuit court judge in Michigan. Lila M. Neuenfelt, "Michigan Lawyers in History," Michigan Bar Journal 99, no. 6 (June 2020): 41.

2. In the 1930s and 40s, Judge Neuenfelt fought for the right for married women to use their birthname.

After her marriage, the Dearborn City Clerk attempted to force Judge Neuenfelt to use her husband's surname when running for office. Judge Neuenfelt obtained an opinion from the Michigan Attorney General clarifying that she did not have to use her married name in the election. OAG, 1935, No. 93, p. 254 (July 30, 1935).

Judge Neuenfelt also successfully petitioned for the right to continue using her birthname following her second marriage. Lila M. Neuenfelt, "Michigan Lawyers in History," Michigan Bar Journal 99, no. 6 (June 2020): 41.

3. Judge Neuenfelt was the youngest person in Michigan to be elected justice of the peace. Lila M. Neuenfelt, "Michigan Lawyers in History," Michigan Bar Journal 99, no. 6 (June 2020): 40.

4. At the time of her swearing in, Judge Neuenfelt was the youngest woman in the United States to become an attorney. "The World's Pictorial Page," Vancouver Daily World, October 8, 1923.

5. Judge Neuenfelt served as president of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan (WLAM) from 1931 to 1933.

Other WLAM past presidents who are inductees of the Hall of Fame include: Anne R. Davidow (1924-1927), Hon. Dorothy Comstock Riley (1957-1958), and Hon. Marilyn Kelly (1987-1988). [www.womenlawyers.org/leadership/past-presidents/](http://www.womenlawyers.org/leadership/past-presidents/) (accessed on March 21, 2021).

### Enduring Contributions

As the accompanying letter from Chief Judge Kenny of the Wayne County Circuit Court demonstrates, Judge Neuenfelt made a lasting impact by inspiring women to seek careers in law and the judiciary generally. And, by inspiring Hall of Fame Inductee Judge Cornelia Groesfsema Kennedy specifically. Derek J. Sarafa, "Judge Cornelia G. Kennedy: First Lady of the Michigan Judiciary," Michigan Bar Journal 79, no. 7 (July 2000): 850.

By doing her job competently, Judge Neuenfelt showed that women are qualified to hold judicial office.

Judge Neuenfelt also contributed to the local labor movement by striking down a Dearborn ordinance prohibiting the distribution of handbills. Lila M. Neuenfelt, "Michigan Lawyers in History," Michigan Bar Journal 99, no. 6 (June 2020): 40.

### Advancing the Status of Women

Being willing to go first advanced the status of women by showing that women can be judges. Her hard work and professionalism also showed that women can be good judges. Additionally, Judge Neuenfelt advanced the status of women by setting a precedent for women to be able to use their birthnames in politics and their career.

### Positive Influence on Youth

There are many reasons why Judge Neuenfelt's story can inspire youth and others across our state.

1. *Courage*: Judge Neuenfelt had the courage to be first. There were very few women in the judiciary nationally when Judge Neuenfelt first took the bench. Indeed, Judge Neuenfelt became a judge at a time when female attorneys had trouble finding employment in their profession.

2. *Perseverance*: Judge Neuenfelt attained each judicial post in which she served by election. This means that she had to work to convince the majority voters of her community to trust her with office even though they probably had not heard of a woman justice of the peace or circuit court judge.

3. *Education*: Judge Neuenfelt valued education and made sacrifices to get the best education she could. She left her parents and small community to go to a better school. Lila M. Neuenfelt, "Michigan Lawyers in History," Michigan Bar Journal 99, no. 6 (June 2020): 40.

4. *Independence*: Judge Neuenfelt resisted social convention and pressure from government actors by fighting to use her birthname. She also resisted the gender norms of her time by becoming an attorney and judge.

5. *Generosity*: Judge Neuenfelt provided a financial support and hope to female attorneys struggling during the Great Depression. Kimberly M. Cahill, "A History of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan," Michigan Bar Journal 77, no. 6 (June 1998): 539. She also frequently assisted in organizing and speaking at attorney events.

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