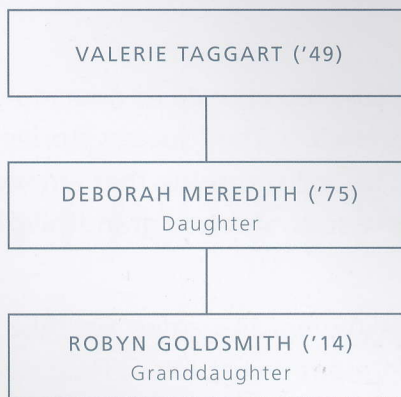


TAGGART FAMILY



By Heather Conn

Before graduating in the top three per cent of her UBC Law class in 1949, Valerie Taggart (née Manning) had already served a year in the Second World War, as a Wren, or member of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. After doing drafting for the navy's sonar system, used to detect enemy submarines, she became the youngest of the war veterans (almost all males) in her class. "The veterans were not there to waste their time," she says.

Left to right: Deborah Meredith, Valerie Taggart and Robyn Goldsmith



From a group of about 130 students, Taggart and three other women graduated from the second-ever law class at UBC, “I was determined that I would go into a career where I could make a decent living. I went to law school and loved it.”

Taggart says that she did not encounter any overt discrimination from the men in her class, many of whom had been officers and non-commissioned officers during the war. However, when discussing the ‘reasonable man’ standard in tort cases, she remembers one professor saying, “Of course, we know that there’s no such thing as a reasonable woman.” Students of both genders would roll their eyes at such remarks, she says.

While articling with Conservative MP Howard Green in 1949, Taggart earned \$25 a month while the two male students both earned double that. She says, “I never questioned the disparity. I would have paid to have a respected law firm with which to be associated.” That year, Taggart married lawyer Kenneth E. Meredith, whom she met at UBC (he later spent 20+ years as a Justice of the Supreme Court of BC), and briefly practiced law with her father-in-law, before leaving the profession to raise a family of three. She says now, “It would have been considered presumptuous of me to practice law when he [her first husband] was practicing law, because there were so many veterans who had graduated from law school. They really had families to support.”

By 1967, Taggart returned to the legal world and became a course lecturer on women and the law and the judicial system for UBC’s Centre for Continuing Education. In the early 1970s, she did legal research for a law firm and served as counsel for underprivileged women in undefended divorce cases. She later became acting director of the Continuing Legal Education Society of British Columbia. Taggart then spent four years as research director of The Law Foundation of British Columbia and became a provincial court judge in British Columbia.

Law school seemed like a logical choice for Taggart’s daughter, Deborah Meredith. Meredith recalls of her childhood, “We talked about law all of the time. We went down to my father’s office, where I knew everybody.

Most of my parents’ friends were lawyers. When dad did *The Advocate* [he edited the Vancouver Bar Association magazine for a decade], he had it out on the card table. It [law] was always around us. It was a lifestyle, not just a job.”

In 1975 Meredith graduated from UBC Law and 12 years later, she returned to UBC for an LLM degree. Since 1980, she has taught commercial and real estate law, and law and international business at UBC’s Sauder School of Business. In 2003, Meredith received the UBC Killam Teaching Award as an outstanding educator. She also ran as a federal Conservative candidate in Vancouver Quadra in 2008 and 2011, but lost to Liberal Joyce Murray.

As authoritative women working in the legal profession at a time when it still was dominated by men, Taggart and Meredith experienced their share of not-so-respectful attitudes. “I recall a chambers application,” Taggart says. “A senior judge before me, before the Chief Justice, said to me afterwards, ‘The only reason you won that was because you’re a woman.’ I don’t think it was so at all. It was because I had a good case.”

After her appointment to the provincial court, Taggart served briefly in Prince George and Mackenzie. She recalls, “After a trial in Mackenzie, an engaging but somewhat brash young lawyer, speaking to sentence, suggested that he thought my brother judges would agree with the proposal. When I asked him what he thought my sister judges would think, the courtroom, which is packed with loggers, cheered. That was a proud moment.”

In a field like law, full of multi-level power relationships, women have to learn not to be patronized, Meredith says. “You have to figure out how to deal with that.” Her suggestion? “Call people by their first names.”

While the law talk around the house inspired Meredith to pursue legal education, it was a different story for Meredith’s daughter, Robyn Goldsmith. She found the legal talk at home “boring” and, subsequently, her path to law school was more circuitous. She spent time at the University of King’s College in Halifax before transferring to UBC, where she completed a BA in 2007 with a focus on European Studies. While on exchange at the University of Otago in New Zealand Goldsmith won the European Union Award for Excellence in European Studies. She also spent time

as a hiking and glacier guide in New Zealand, and as an outdoor instructor on Vancouver Island. It was in these roles that she began to read a lot of cases and literature about legal issues regarding accidents and liability in adventure tourism. That piqued her interest in law, and now, like her mother and grandmother, she is pursuing legal education at UBC.

Goldsmith's first year of law school has been quite different than her mother's or grandmother's experience. In 1949, Taggart was one of only four women to graduate that year. By the time Meredith graduated, there were almost 10 times as many women, but they still made up less than 20 per cent of the class. Since the early 90s, UBC law classes have been roughly evenly split between men and women, and Goldsmith's class is 51 per cent women. But it's not just the gender breakdown that has changed; the three women all reflect that there are other notable differences between the Classes of 1949, 1975 and 2014.

In Taggart's era, law students — mostly male veterans, many of whom were married — were grateful simply to get their degree and use it to support their family. Back then, the federal government funded war veterans to go back to university; if they stayed in the top 25 per cent of the class,

as she did, the monies continued until the student received a degree. "That was one of the best policies the federal government ever brought in," she says.

During Meredith's time at UBC Law School, in the Vietnam War years, activism soared and she shared classes with "draft dodger/deserter types." Those were also the early days of the Aboriginal rights movement, and advocates like Louise Mandell were in her year.

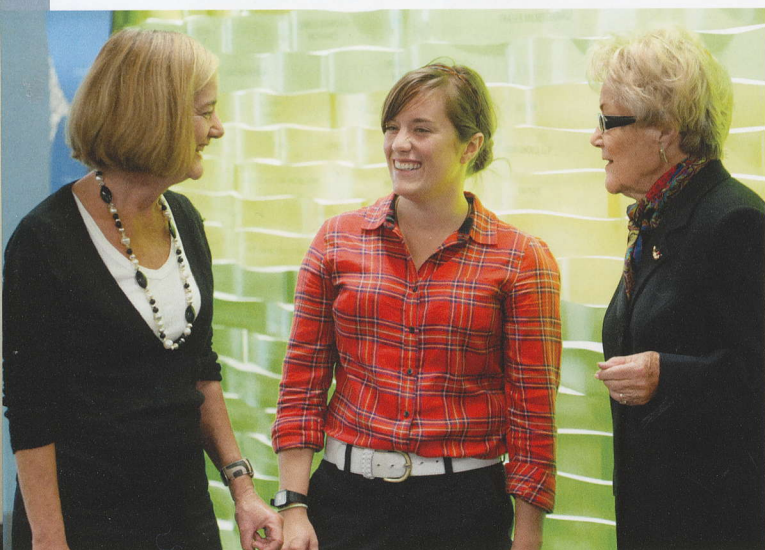
The first thing that Goldsmith noticed at UBC Law was many students' fervent focus on a career, rather than an education. She says, "In my first week of law school, I was overwhelmed and surprised by how immediately people started talking about what articling job they were going to get and what firm they wanted to work for."

Compared to the students in the post-war era, or the early 70s, they feel that today's law students are more business-minded and want to know more about that aspect of law. Meredith says with a laugh, "When I went to university, it was just nerds who'd be interested in business. Now, most people are, to some degree."

Although the atmosphere at UBC Law School is competitive, Goldsmith doesn't find it cutthroat; students still support each other. During her first month of classes, she says that her biggest challenge is the social "workload." "I don't know how people balance all of the events with the readings. I haven't figured that out yet."

In Meredith's era, her section of 60 law students bonded over watching the Canada-Soviet Union hockey series in 1972. Of the eighth and deciding game of that exciting series, she remembers, "We all watched Paul Henderson score that final [winning] goal together." During Taggart's law school days, the social highlight was the annual Law Ball, held at the Commodore Ballroom with a live orchestra, attended by faculty and students, all in formal attire.

Today, in her eighties, surveying women's role in law through the decades, Taggart says that female university students and professionals are riding on the backs of many people, both men and women, who fought for equality for all. She shares the comment of a friend, a provincial court judge and father of three sons: "All right-thinking men are feminists." In Taggart's words, "Feminism, essentially, is equality of opportunity." ●



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VALERIE TAGGART