

Newcomb alum retires as New Orleans judge after 35-year career

May 2, 2023

|

Mary Sparacello msparace@tulane.edu

[View PDF](#)



Robin Giarrusso (NC '74, L *77) knows the importance of a role model. When Giarrusso started at Newcomb College, she intended to pursue a psychology degree. It was a political science course with Jean Danielson, PhD, who became an advisor and mentor, that changed Giarrusso's entire career trajectory. She decided to major

in political science, and Danielson encouraged her to attend law school.

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Giarrusso retired May 1 after a 35-year career as an Orleans Parish Civil District Court judge, a career that has seen her presiding over notable cases as one of the city’s most respected jurists.

Her storied career in public service owes a debt to her time at Tulane. She grew up in Denver and chose to attend Newcomb “sight unseen.” Once in the Crescent City, she promptly fell in love with Tulane and then fell in love with New Orleans.

After law school, she accepted a job in the New Orleans city attorney’s office, a choice influenced by her role as a young mother. At Tulane Law School, she met husband Joseph Giarrusso Jr. (L *77) and they had their first child while she was still a student. “I realized that government probably was a good place to combine being the kind of mother that I wanted to be and also being the kind of lawyer I wanted to be.”

She ran for judge in 1988 against four other candidates and learned just how highly regarded Newcomb and Tulane were in the city. Numerous people that she didn’t know told her they voted for her because of her impressive degrees. “They would say, ‘I voted for you because you went to Tulane. I voted for you because of my respect for Tulane Law School. I voted for you because you're Newcomb-educated.’”

Giarrusso has been well-respected both by her peers and by voters. Judges in Louisiana are elected in partisan elections. After her initial six-year term, she ran unopposed until 2020, a race that she handily won.

She has presided over prominent cases, such as the contentious and politically charged lawsuit when she ordered then-New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu to fund pensions for New Orleans firefighters, after refusing to fund the pensions for years. More recently, she signed a temporary injunction to enjoin Louisiana from enforcing abortion laws because she found that the laws were inconsistent and confusing to medical providers.

While she got a lot of publicity for those cases, each one that has come before her has left an impression. “To me, every case is important, because if you're the person that's injured in a car accident, or you're going through a divorce, or you have a fight with your contractor, it's important to you, even though the dollar amount or the public significance is maybe not that critical.”

One case that stood out to her involved the family of a New Orleans girl who died of an asthma attack in school. School officials failed to call an ambulance until they could reach her mother and get her promise to pay for the ambulance. Giarrusso found negligence on the part of the Orleans Parish School Board and its employees.

“Every case touches my heart ... but that one particularly touched me.”

Giarrusso has volunteered for Tulane by serving on the Tulane Alumni Association Board of Directors, the Newcomb Alumnae Association Board of Directors, on her 45th reunion committee and as Newcomb Class Agent for several reunions. She feels compelled to give back “because Tulane is largely responsible for my career.”

In retirement, she is looking forward to traveling, spending time with her two granddaughters and volunteer work.

“They would say, ‘I voted for you because you went to Tulane. I voted for you because of my respect for Tulane Law School. I voted for you because you're Newcomb-educated.’”

As she looks back on her successful and meaningful career, she extols the importance of role models. Her first role model was her mother, the neighborhood precinct captain for the Democratic Committee. Giarrusso remembers that as a child she and her brother filled their wagon with political handouts and leafletted the entire neighborhood. And her Jewish faith taught her the concept of *tikkun olam*, which means to repair the world. “I believe I'm obligated to do that.”

And after Danielson served as an influential role model for Giarrusso while she was in college, Giarrusso has tried to pay it forward in her own career by mentoring

young lawyers. "That's been very rewarding to me."

This mentorship could be formal or more happenstance. From the bench, she sometimes noticed that a young lawyer had done more of the legwork for a case even though the experienced lawyer argued it. When she would see the younger lawyer handing over papers or whispering to the more seasoned lawyer, Giarrusso said she would often suggest giving the newer lawyer a chance to take center stage. "I'll often say, 'why don't you let her argue this?'" She says that her suggestions were often taken.

Giarrusso remembers seeing Sarah T. Hughes, a federal judge who swore in Lyndon B. Johnson as president after John F. Kennedy was assassinated. It was the first time it occurred to her that a woman could be a judge, and it inspired her.

"It's important to mentor people that you do know, but it's also important to realize that in your life you may be a role model to somebody that you've never even met."