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### WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DEFENSE ATTORNEY--LINDA STEPHENS

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Twenty years ago, I became the first female president of the North Carolina Association of Defense Attorneys. Serving as president of this organization is one of the crowning accomplishments and highest honors of my professional life. Getting there was a challenging, but also rewarding, journey. I have found it fitting that I became the first female president in 2001, because, for so many years, the notion of a woman leading a group of civil defense attorneys was as alien an idea as the tale told by Arthur Clarke in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

I was in law school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1976 until I graduated in May 1979. Women made up less than 20% of my class, and some male classmates believed, and sometimes outright expressed, that we were "tokens" taking up the space that should have been given to men. I wouldn't call the environment hostile, but it definitely was not welcoming. In those days, few women went into careers as litigators. Most went into government service, still a noble calling. I became a law clerk at the Court of Appeals for a year and then served as a deputy commissioner for the Industrial Commission for four years. But, I wanted to try cases. I did not want to spend my career watching other lawyers, mostly white men, try cases. In August 1984, I left the Industrial Commission to go to work as the first female lawyer at Teague Campbell Dennis and Gorham in Raleigh.

Early on, I was required to apply for membership in the NCADA. I did. Not long after, I received my Certificate of Membership recognizing "him" as a good standing. I promptly sent the certificate back, telling then Executive Director Annette Boutwell that I was not a "him" and that I was sure she had inadvertently pulled my certificate out of the wrong stack. At that time, I had become the third female member of the Association, behind Beth F. Sheila Fellerath. Talk about trailblazers! Anyway, Annette let me know that it was not a mistake. The Association did not have any membership certificates for women. But, she was ordering some!

I continued to call out the white male members of the Association. My firm always supported the annual meeting, and I attended my first one in Hilton Head in April. The weather was unpredictable, frequently cold and rainy. But there we were. The CLE was as exceptional as it has been. Back then, though, the speakers were all white men, who addressed the audience as "Gentlemen." Troublemaker me, I raised my hand to say, "I'm a gentleman!" And then I went up afterward to tell the particular speaker the same thing.

I railed against the fact that there were never any women speaking at the podium! Careful what you ask for. I think it was 1994, could be wrong a year or two. I became the first female speaker at the annual meeting. My place on the program? Last on Saturday. But, it was a significant start.

I do not remember who asked me to be on the Board, but I gladly accepted, served my three years, and went away. Then, the call came. New president Cooney wanted me to be secretary. I have never been fond of taking the minutes, but I jumped at the chance to be an officer of this Association. I was an officer. Pressure on. Did it. And I will forever be grateful to Cooney for recognizing and rewarding my fight for the women in this Association. I rose through the ranks" after that to eventually become President.

Leslie Packer became the second female president of this Association. I was happier and prouder at her induction than my own. Then, Bonnie Re followed by Tricia Shields, the first time the Association benefitted from two women in a row! And then the first African-American woman, Day M. coming up next, Sara Lincoln!

I love Sara as if she were my daughter. I am so happy that she is going to be leading the NCADA for the next year. She will advance the cause and women in the profession and, specifically, as civil defense lawyers. Can't wait to celebrate with her!

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