



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
DISTRICT OF MASSACHUSETTS  
OFFICE OF THE CLERK  
1 COURTHOUSE WAY  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02210

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**PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT**

September 29, 2020

Greetings:

I am delighted to report that Judge Rya Zobel has won the Edward J. Devitt Distinguished Service to Justice Award for 2020. The award was created to honor a federal judge with an exceptional and distinguished career who has made significant contributions to the administration of justice, the advancement of the rule of law, and the improvement of society as a whole. The selection is made by a panel of judges that is chaired by a Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

It is no exaggeration to say that this is the highest honor that a federal judge can receive. We are immensely proud of Judge Zobel, who is an exceptionally deserving recipient. And in her 88th year, she is still blazing new trails: she is the first-ever female District Judge to win the award.

Below is a copy of the letter to the committee that was submitted when she was nominated for the award. It is an extraordinarily moving and inspiring account of her life and career.

Please join us in congratulating Judge Zobel on this wonderful occasion.

Sincerely,

/s/ F. Dennis Saylor IV

Chief Judge F. Dennis Saylor IV



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
DISTRICT OF MASSACHUSETTS  
JOHN JOSEPH MOAKLEY UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE  
1 COURTHOUSE WAY  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02210

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June 25, 2020

Honorable Neil M. Gorsuch  
United States Supreme Court Building  
One First Street NE  
Washington, DC 20543

Honorable Thomas M. Hardiman  
Joseph F. Weis, Jr. United States Courthouse  
700 Grant Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Honorable Christine M. Arguello  
Alfred A. Arraj United States Courthouse  
901 19th Street  
Denver, CO 80294

American Judicature Society  
The Opperman Center  
2700 University Ave.  
Des Moines, IA 50311

Re: Nomination of Judge Rya W. Zobel for Devitt Distinguished Service to Justice Award

Dear Justice Gorsuch, Judge Hardiman, and Judge Arguello:

We the judges of the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts are honored to nominate our colleague Rya W. Zobel to the Selection Panel of the Edward J. Devitt Distinguished Service to Justice Award for its consideration as the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Devitt Award recipient. The American Judicature Society has described the ideal nominee for the Devitt Award as “an Article III judge of national stature, who has had a distinguished, lifelong career characterized by decisions that, through his wisdom, humanity and commitment to the rule of law, make clear that bench, bar, and community alike would willingly entrust that judge with the most complex cases of the most far-reaching importance.” Judge Zobel’s life work defines the ideal nominee.

Rya's preeminence and contributions are national in scope, spanning the entire breadth of her forty-one years as a district judge. Shortly into her tenure, Rya served on the Judicial Conference Committee on the Operation of the Jury System. Her practical suggestions and focus on the institution of the Judiciary led to her swift appointment, two years later, to the Judicial Conference Committee on Judicial Improvements, which exercised jurisdiction over automation and technology issues. In 1990, the Conference disbanded the Committee on Judicial Improvements and created the Committee on Automation and Technology to lead the Judiciary into the then-developing computer age. Recognizing her strategic vision for the Judiciary and her common-sense leadership, Chief Justice William Rehnquist tapped Rya to serve as the first Chair of this new Committee.

In that role, Rya oversaw the conversion from manual to automated processes. Under Rya's leadership, the Committee directed the establishment of the Data Communications Network, which forms the foundation connecting the Administrative Office and every Court unit to each other as well as the internet. The DCN enabled the many developments that followed, including the PACER CM/ECF system for electronic filing and case management and, most recently, the Judiciary's sudden, relatively seamless conversion to telework and remote court proceedings. The Committee approved receipt of court filings by fax, asked the Rules Committee to explore changes to permit filings by other electronic means, and approved a pilot study of videoconferencing for oral arguments.

In 1995, Rya became the first woman to lead the Federal Judicial Center, moving from modernizing the administrative tools and processes upon which the entire Judiciary depends to overseeing the education of every Judiciary employee, from clerks and probation officers to judges. At the time, the FJC faced budgetary difficulties and questions over the very need for such an entity. As Director, Rya resolved the fiscal concerns with the development of the Judicial Television Network—the FJC's first distance- or remote-learning initiative and the precursor to the now-familiar FJC webinars. This enabled the cost-saving elimination of many in-person conferences, while still

preserving face-to-face teaching for its most effective deployment. This reorientation of the FJC, steered by Rya, satisfied the concerns of Congressional overseers and remains in place today. No doubt, this reflects Rya's great foresight. On her recommendation, the Chief Justice formed a strategic planning committee to direct the FJC over the long-term. This plan, too, continues to guide the FJC today. It is no exaggeration to say Rya has quietly and humbly educated every member of the Judiciary over the past twenty-five years; it is a fair assessment of her far-reaching contributions. However, perhaps the greatest testimony to Rya's "wisdom and humanity" comes from the FJC's staff. Although she directed the FJC at a time of great change requiring tough management decisions in the face of substantial fiscal difficulties, she nonetheless earned the undying reverence of the entire FJC staff. They, like all who have had the pleasure of working with her in the Judiciary, sincerely admire and enjoy her.

Though Rya returned to her seat as a trial judge in Boston, she has continued to serve the federal judiciary nationally, most recently with the Committee on Financial Disclosure. This persistent service illuminates Rya. Many judges in the twilight years of their careers would have little interest in serving on this Conference Committee; not so for Rya. She embraces each new issue, deeply reveres the Judicial Branch, and readily contributes wherever she is needed.

Mirroring her national service, Rya is the quintessential team player leading our Court. She reworked the jury selection process saving substantial time for citizens, judges, and lawyers alike. From the start of her time here, she helped transform the District into a collegial court, with every judge contributing to its operation. Thanks to Rya, despite many changes in court membership since 1979, this consensus, shared-management approach has remained.

Of course, the true measure of a judge is the "wisdom, humanity and commitment to the Rule of Law" embodied in her decisions and measured by whether the "bench, bar, and community alike

would willingly entrust that judge with the most complex cases of the most far-reaching importance.”

By these criteria, Rya is simply the best the Judiciary has to offer.

For over forty years, Rya has tried cases and resolved disputes with relish for each new case, a fair yet firm hand, and an abiding humility. Lawyers delight in trying cases before Rya. She is, in their words, “extremely fair,” “quite brilliant,” and “a pleasure to appear before”; a judge who is “not afraid to put her thoughts on the record and clearly state her positions and concerns,” with “an instinct for what really count[s] in the cases.” Jurors, likewise, adore serving in her courtroom. She respects them and their time. She transforms them into participants rather than silent observers, offering explanations of the elements of the trial as it unfolds and comprehensible instructions she always crafts herself, all the while maintaining the jurors’ traditional role. Circuit judges appreciate her crisp rulings, orderly trials, and practical enforcements of the rule of law. Her colleagues seek her advice and strive to emulate her unusual mix of talents. When in doubt, members of our Court apply the following rule, artfully distilled by one of our number: “Just do what Rya does; she is always right.”

Every person leaves Rya’s courtroom inspired by her approach to the judicial process, improved by her human touch, and respectful of the decision rendered whether or not it was favorable to them. None of this comes as a surprise to those who know her, for it is the manifestation of her reverence for our judicial process and, as Rya says to new citizens when she presides over their naturalization ceremonies, her deep and abiding faith in the American “experiment in self-government,” which “distinguishes this country from nearly all others in the world.”

Rya’s personal history explains her instinct for oversight that is simultaneously firm and gentle, as well as her belief in the importance of institutions over individuals. She was born in 1931, the first child of Paul Wiechart, a German employee of a printing company, and his Hungarian Jewish wife, Elsie. By hiding his wife’s religion—even from their children—Wiechart survived the Nazi regime. The family did not fare so well thereafter. Russian soldiers took Wiechart from the family home when

Rya was thirteen. Hours later, the soldiers returned for her mother. Rya would never see her father again and, for many years, heard nothing of her mother, who languished in prison camps. Orphaned with responsibility for her younger brother, Rya shepherded their survival with the assistance of family friends for months, until relatives from the United States sent an emissary to smuggle Rya and her brother out of East Germany. The two children slipped past armed East German soldiers in the dead of night, wiggled through an opening in the barbed-wire border fence, endured months alone in refugee camps—where Rya protected her brother by directing him to sleep sandwiched between herself and the wall—and, finally, endured a rough crossing of the North Atlantic on the *Ernie Pyle*. Even knowing scarcely a word of English, Rya nonetheless well understood the meaning of the towering Statue of Liberty she saw presiding over her entry into New York Harbor. Along with every person on the ship, she stood on the deck and saluted, her eyes brimming with tears.

Though formal school had ended for Rya several years earlier due to the chaos of war, within only two-and-a-half years of her arrival in the United States, Rya mastered the English language, graduated from high school, and matriculated at Radcliffe College. From there, as they say, the rest is history. Rya was one of the first women to attend Harvard Law School, the first woman to become a partner in a major Boston law firm (Goodwin Procter), the first woman to become an Article III judge on any court in the First Circuit, the first Chair of the Automation Committee, and the first female Director of the Federal Judicial Center. And she also became the best trial judge in the District, and one of the best in the Nation of the past four decades.

One more point truly merits your consideration of Rya for the Devitt Award. Though her performance as a trial judge is legendary, many superb trial judges serve the public. Though she has made long-lasting contributions to the judicial system as whole, many Article III judges have also made important contributions. However, Rya Zobel *the person* is what sets her apart from the rest as both a judge and a human being. Rya brings a contagious zest to her work that infects all those around

her with her delight in the judicial process, her openness to each new challenge, and her seriousness of purpose (but never excessive seriousness of self). Though she survived the Nazis and the Soviets, endured forced separation from her parents, made her way in a new and truly foreign world, and endured the difficulties that beset women entering the legal profession during the 1950s, Rya never utters a cross word. She does not dwell on the hardships of her past. She speaks glowingly of Harvard Law School, her reception in the Boston legal community, and the embrace she received from her male colleagues upon joining the bench. She is the epitome of warmth and civility.

And so, as Rya approaches her eighty-ninth birthday with forty-one years of service on the federal bench, we urge you to grant the Devitt Award to the most extraordinary of persons who exemplifies all of the values the award celebrates and to which we each aspire.

Attached please find all required nomination materials. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

/s/ F. Dennis Saylor IV  
Chief Judge F. Dennis Saylor IV

/s/ Nathaniel M. Gorton  
Judge Nathaniel M. Gorton

/s/ Patti B. Saris  
Judge Patti B. Saris

/s/ Timothy S. Hillman  
Judge Timothy S. Hillman

/s/ Mark G. Mastroianni  
Judge Mark G. Mastroianni

/s/ Allison D. Burroughs  
Judge Allison D. Burroughs

/s/ Douglas P. Woodlock  
Senior Judge Douglas P. Woodlock

/s/ Michael A. Ponsor  
Senior Judge Michael A. Ponsor

/s/ William G. Young  
Judge William G. Young

/s/ Richard G. Stearns  
Judge Richard G. Stearns

/s/ Denise J. Casper  
Judge Denise J. Casper

/s/ Indira Talwani  
Judge Indira Talwani

/s/ Leo T. Sorokin  
Judge Leo T. Sorokin

/s/ Mark. L. Wolf  
Senior Judge Mark L. Wolf

/s/ Edward F. Harrington  
Senior Judge Edward F. Harrington

/s/ George A. O'Toole, Jr.  
Senior Judge George A. O'Toole, Jr.