“How can I make your job easier?” were the first words Carol Fuller ’54 said when asked for an interview about her career as a judge. This question was not empty; clearly it had been said hundreds, if not thousands, of times before and she meant it.

As the first woman judge in the state of Washington outside of King County, Fuller had few role models. Therefore, whether it was intentional or not, she blazed a trail for all women judges who came after her. Her daughter-in-law Leo Fuller ’84 is betting that it was deliberate. “Carol has never forgotten the challenges encountered by a trail blazer,” Leo Fuller explains. “However, the experience never hardened her. Carol is a relentless optimist and, in this way, has inspired others notwithstanding how hard it was to achieve what she did.”

Judge Fuller of the Thurston County Superior Court was appointed by former Governor Dixie Lee Ray in 1979 after five years on the bench in Mason County as a District Court judge. After receiving this appointment, she went on to win a landslide victory in the Thurston and Mason County general elections.

In 1981, Ken Walz, an attorney in Tumwater, Washington, wrote of Judge Fuller in the Washington State Bar News, “As women attorneys continue their advancement in the legal profession, let’s not forget those who led the way.”

Then on February 9, 1989 Judge Fuller was recognized during the 10th anniversary dinner of the Northwest Women’s Law Center (now Legal Voices) at the Seattle Sheraton. Judge Fuller received an award for her outstanding contribution in advancing the legal rights of women in the Northwest. Nearly 1,300 people attended and author/activist Gloria Steinem was the featured speaker.
Carol Fuller began her journey to becoming a ground-breaking judge and mentor when she entered law school in 1951 on the advice of a junior college teacher who said that women “should have good work to do.” While there were four women in her class, three graduated and only two of those passed the bar exam.

In law school, Judge Fuller enjoyed the challenge of the material.

“There was so much to learn,” she said. “I was devoted to learning the law and to learning how to practice the law.”

She also met her husband Herb during the first month of law school. They met in Contracts class and married in 1954.

After graduation, the Fullers moved to France where Herb Fuller served in the U.S. military for five years. They then returned to Olympia. In 1969, at the age of 39, Judge Fuller felt that their family was “stable enough” for her to resume her law career. Their youngest daughter was 9-years-old and although Judge Fuller had not worked since graduation, she took a job with Legal Services in Tacoma. In 1971 she joined her husband in his private practice.

Recently retired Judge Christine Pomeroy was in the fifth grade when she met Carol Fuller.

“Somebody told me she was a lawyer,” Pomeroy said. “That really impressed me. I didn’t think women could be lawyers so I asked her. She replied ‘Yes, dear, they can be.’”

Inspired by Judge Fuller, Pomeroy attended law school. After graduating, Judge Fuller mentored Pomeroy and the young lawyer practiced in front of Judge Fuller for 15 years before being elected to take Fuller’s position on the bench, an honor not lost on Pomeroy.

Pomeroy said the most important lesson Judge Fuller taught her was “civility.”

“As a judge and as a person, Carol was humble, compassionate and always wanted to resolve everything. Carol promoted alternative dispute resolution well before that concept was used as it now is.”

Judge Lisa Sutton

“She asked me and the opposing attorney if we had discussed resolving the case,” Sutton said. “We had not, so she asked us to meet in her chambers where we had a cup of tea and talked about how to obtain a mutually agreeable settlement.”

Chief Justice (Ret.) Gerry Alexander ’64

“I always admired her,” Alexander said. “It was tough on her at first, being the only woman judge, but she never showed it. It didn’t seem to get under her skin.”

After seeing a documentary on women in the legislature in the late 1980s, Fuller was inspired to create a video recording on the history of women judges in Washington state. The Northwest Women’s Law Center agreed to produce the film with the help of Susan Starbuck.

In classic “Carol” fashion, Judge Fuller gives Starbuck all the credit for the award-winning film.

“Susan had the energy, intelligence and fundraising abilities,” she said.

Before retiring from Superior Court in 1993, Judge Fuller presided over thousands of important cases including the overcrowding of Echo Glen Children’s Center near Snoqualmie, the ruling on tax exemptions relating to heart-lung machines and hearing aids, the halting of logging in Snohomish County, and cases involving fish trafficking. But when asked about her most important or significant cases, Judge Fuller said she considers every case to be significant.