

Nancy King, at 59

When Nancy King was asked when she was going to get a “real job” as a “real attorney,” she would explain that she was an unabashed idealist who believed that poor people should have the same access to legal representation as those who can afford to hire lawyers.

During her long career providing legal aid to the poor, King said she was inspired by the clients she served: “Over the years I have been moved by their courage and decency. With dignity and determination, they face the terror of domestic abuse, the fear of violence in their own neighborhoods, the threat of becoming homeless, or the anxiety of being one paycheck away from disaster.”



King started her career as a VISTA attorney at the Legal Aid Society of Albuquerque, Inc. in 1972. She then became staff attorney and managing attorney. In 1977 she returned home to Boston where she became a staff attorney at South Middlesex Legal Services in Framingham, a non-profit law firm representing the most vulnerable people living in the area’s 36 communities. King was named Executive Director of SMLS in 1979.

In the wake of devastating cuts in federal funds in the early 80s, King successfully sought to diversify funding for SMLS through foundation grants and private donations. She also participated in the community, serving on the steering committees of the Neponset Valley and MetroWest Community Health Care Coalitions and was appointed by the Supreme Judicial Court as a commissioner of the Equal Justice Commission. She also served on the boards of the MetroWest Boys and Girls Club and the South Middlesex Bar Association.

King graduated from Boston College Law School in 1972 at a time when the class was only 10 percent female. She credited her parents for her pioneering spirit, saying they never discouraged her or her sisters from achieving what they set out to do--though she liked to joke that the one exception was chewing gum in public, which her mother thought was quite unladylike.

King received the Boston College Law School’s’ David Nelson Award for Public Interest Law in 1994, one of her many awards, which also included the United Way of Tri-County’s “Women of Character Award” in 2003.

A notorious workaholic, King would often bring her nieces and nephews to her office to play while she worked. King, who grew up in a tight knit Irish family in West Roxbury, loved family reunions, especially at Christmas when she would arrive with a trunkful of presents for her beloved nieces and nephews. Even during grueling chemotherapy treatments she would make sure she attended her nieces’ and nephews’ sporting events and school concerts and plays.

King's second family was her legal services colleagues, the "best and the brightest," who made many sacrifices to serve the disadvantaged. SMLS Development Coordinator Janice Watson Camp and the SMLS staff wrote: "They say it takes a minute to find a special person, an hour to appreciate them, a day to love them, but then an entire life to forget them. We will never forget Nancy. She has left behind a legacy of committed staff and a program deserving of her reputation."

King fought breast cancer with the same determination with which she fought for her clients. She died at home in Lincoln on December 18 surrounded by her family. Bob Sable, Executive Director of Greater Boston Legal Services says: "Nancy was astonishingly open about her struggle with cancer. But she never complained. There was no self-pity. I asked her about it once not long ago and she said: "You give yourself ten minutes a day to feel sorry for yourself and then you get on with it."

King is survived by her sisters Mary E. King of Boston, Patricia A. King of San Anselmo, CA, Eileen Coburn of Darien, CT, and her brothers Thomas J. King, Jr. of Falls Church, VA and Michael P. King of Lincoln, MA. She is also survived by eight nieces and nephews, Jenna, Casey, Peter and Tommy King, Michael, Marietta and Madeline Coburn, and Anna Hirsch.

Friends and family may attend funeral services on Saturday at 9:00 AM at the John C. Bryant Funeral Home, 56 Pemberton Road, Wayland followed by a funeral mass at St. Julia's Church, 374 Boston Post Road, Weston at 10:00 AM. Internment will be at St. Joseph's Cemetery in West Roxbury following the funeral mass. Visiting hours are Friday, 4-8 PM. In lieu of flowers, donations in King's memory may be made to South Middlesex Legal Services, 354 Waverly Street, Framingham, MA 01701.