


# Sue Gardner, 95, prominent trusts and estates lawyer and civic leader

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Like another well-known female lawyer of her generation, a young Sue Gardner was told by an Ivy League law school that she would be taking the place of a man if she enrolled in law school after her graduation from Smith College.

It was in 1952, a few years before future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was famously told the same thing when she entered law school a year after the birth of her first child.

Mrs. Gardner, a graduate of Bennett High School, waited longer to attend law school. Much longer.

The former Sue Shaffer didn't enroll in the University at Buffalo's Law School for 20 years, until she was 42, by which time she was raising two middle-school children.

Mrs. Gardner, who practiced law at Kavinoky Cook LLP for more than 45 years, died May 22 at the age of 95 in the care of Hospice, her daughter-in-law, Cynthia Gardner, who is a nurse, and her children.

It would not be an overstatement to say that she was one of the trailblazers of her generation among professional and businesswomen in Buffalo who attempted to eradicate the sexism they experienced.

A co-founder of both the Women's Group and the Western New York Women's Foundation in 2000, Mrs. Gardner left a legacy of promoting and strengthening the standing and prospects of professional women.

In 1983, she was one of five female attorneys who formed The Women's Group, which was created to form a network for women to support and mentor one another and to advance women in visible leadership roles in the community. The organization has more than 125 members today representing every profession.

"Sue believed so strongly in what we were doing," said Mary Dee Martoche, retired Chief Clerk of the Erie County Surrogate's Court. "She played an integral role in the formative years of The Women's Group, reaching out to broaden the group beyond law to include women who had achieved success in a variety of fields."

“Sue was a remarkable woman – strong, intelligent, generous and unapologetically courageous,” said Sheri Scavone, CEO of the WNY Women’s Foundation. “A true trailblazer, she lived life fully on her own terms and inspired others to do the same. Sue thoughtfully led the founding of the WNY Women’s Foundation with both conviction and compassion, leaving a legacy that will continue to uplift and empower generations of women to come.”

Her guiding principle was that women should have equal footing alongside men in pursuing their professions, which wasn’t a given in the early years of her career.

At the start of her career, she dealt with basic things such as eliminating the practice of having a separate women’s entrance at a private business club.

While it was not obvious at the beginning of her career how her estate planning practice would develop, she soon learned she had one advantage: Women seemed to like talking to another woman about their estate plans.

It was for her clients, and the relationships she developed with them, that she continued practicing until age 87.

Mrs. Gardner was most proud of being the first woman in Western New York to be elected to the American College of Trusts and Estates Counsel.

She held several leadership positions in the community, including with the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, the Buffalo Landmark and Preservation Board and the Greater Buffalo Chapter of the American Red Cross, where she served as its chairwoman from 1983 to 1986.

When asked by one of her grandsons why she took on so many cultural and public service commitments, Mrs. Gardner said, “Buffalo is a real city. A real city has all of these organizations. If we don’t take on these things, they will not survive and we will not have a real city.”

Mrs. Gardner and her late husband, prominent attorney Arnold B. Gardner, were Buffalo Bills season ticket holders for 50 years. She thought of the players as members of her family and was upset when

one got hit too hard. She cheered for the good plays. For the bad ones she quietly murmured, “Oy.”

Mrs. Gardner was grateful for her success and even more grateful for her family and their success. In her later years, she valued her relationship with her three adult grandchildren, which she referred to as a “special bonus.”

She may not have understood how to use all the features of her coffee maker, but she made sure she learned how to use her cell phone to communicate in every way possible with her grandchildren.

Mrs. Gardner is survived by a daughter, Diane Gardner Cozzarin; a son, Jonathan; and three grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. June 1 in Temple Beth Zion, 805 Delaware Avenue.