

THE DAILY RECORD

LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Myrna Felder Entertains Lunchtime Audience *GRAWA's Herstory Event Provides Humor, Enthusiasm And Inspiration*

BY NORA A. JONES,
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Some people are exceptionally good at captivating an audience. Those who attended GRAWA's Feb. 9 Herstory Luncheon were spellbound by one such storyteller: Myrna Felder, a matrimonial attorney from Manhattan.

"I have known Myrna for over 20 years through our activities with the Family Law Section of the New York State Bar Association," noted Jerry Davidson after the lunch event. "I knew some background about Myrna's pre-law days, but not to the extent of what she informed us today."

GRAWA Treasurer Connor O'Brien noted, "I think the best thing about Herstory, and specifically the talk by Myrna Felder, is the opportunity to hear her honest enthusiasm for her career and her life. She takes such joy in whatever life throws her way — it's impossible to listen to her and not feel your own 'jets' being relit."

The Pre-Law Years

With a great sense of humor and an animated presentation style, Felder began her talk by explaining that around the fifth grade, she took dancing lessons like all the girls in the neighborhood. In addition to routine recitals, Felder was invited to participate on a local television program featuring talented children.

"They made me a regular on the show for a couple of years, and ultimately my TV connections led to an opportunity to audition on Broadway," Felder recalled. "But my parents insisted there would be plenty of time to dance after I finished my education."

So, turning down that audition, Felder did some summer stock performances and fit theater into her college schedule as she proceeded to earn her degree from Pembroke College — the women's college at Brown University. Graduating in 1961, her parents agreed to support her for up to one year, but if she hadn't made it in theater by then, she had to promise to return to school for a graduate degree.

"Within two weeks I have a job in a musical comedy off Broadway," Felder laughed. "And it wasn't easy getting parts when you're as short as I am. Generally, the directors wanted the dancers to be tall and lanky. Here I was, all of 5 feet tall."



PHOTO BY NORA A. JONES

GRAWA'S HERSTORY — Monroe County Family Court Judge Marilyn O'Connor was instrumental in arranging for Myrna Felder (center) to speak at this year's Herstory lunch event. Current GRAWA President Denine Carr joins them for this photo.

On Broadway

Felder went on to share that in the 1960s most dancers couldn't sing and most singers couldn't dance. It was her good fortune to be able to do both, and that may have been a key factor in her landing some parts that may have otherwise been out of reach.

"One great thing about the theater," Felder reminded her audience, "you are trained to live with rejection, and that is a skill which carried over to my legal career."

Felder appeared in *Stop the World — I Want to Get Off* for hundreds of performances in the early 1960s. The show was produced by David Merrick and directed by Anthony Newley, but if you look for Felder's name on old playbills, you'll only find her stage name: Rawley Bates.

"My agent didn't think Myrna Danenberg had the right ring to it," she said jokingly.

Many of the songs from *Stop the World — "What Kind of Fool Am I"* and *"Gonna Build a Mountain"* — enjoyed enormous success beyond the Broadway run of the play.

Bates (a/k/a Felder) also served as dance captain in *Roar of the Greasepaint*, *Smell of the Crowd*, another musical comedy produced by David Merrick.

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HERSTORY ATTENDEES — Former GRAWA President Elizabeth Wolford (standing) comes over to greet Immediate Past President Audrey Peartree (right) and her mother-in-law Irene Peartree.

MCBA STAFF — Janet Montante, Calista Amering and Louise Spinelli took time from their busy day to attend the Herstory event.

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Twist Of Fate

In the course of her Broadway career, Felder had to break a manager contract in order to accept a part she wanted in another production.

"In order to take a part in *Anything Goes*, I had to break my contract with a manager," she explained. "One of my colleagues in *Stop the World* knew this attorney, Raoul Felder. He worked with me to resolve my contract dispute, and through the course of negotiations we began dating. We ultimately settled the contract for \$650. My mother still says it's the best \$650 I ever spent."

Of course Felder also pointed out the irony of her own stage name and the name of her attorney/ husband.

Beyond The Theater

Felder always knew that dancing was a young person's role, so after marrying her former attorney and finishing her contract obligations, Felder was planning to settle down and pursue an advanced degree in history.

"My husband suggested that law school might be a good choice," she said. "I took the LSAT with no real intention of going to law school. That's probably the secret of doing well on that test — no pressure."

She entered New York University pregnant with her first child. When Rachel was born, Felder took 18 months off from school, then returned to complete her law degree, pregnant with James in her senior year.

Graduating *cum laude* in 1971, Felder joined her husband's law practice and has been active in matrimonial matters since.

Questions From The Audience

When asked what is the hardest part of being an attorney, Felder admitted that restraining from "snappy patter" is very difficult for her.

Asked about some of the famous people she and her husband have represented, the audience learned that lyricist Alan Jay Lerner apparently hasn't "learned" much about marriage since he has had eight wives.

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A BIT OF ANIMATION — Myrna Felder had no use for the podium as she told her story to an attentive audience.



LONG-TIME FRIENDS — Myrna Felder strikes a pose for a photo op with long-time friend Jerry Davidson.



AMONG THE GUESTS — Maureen Lamb and Brighton Town Court Judge Karen Morris were among the audience members who came to hear Myrna Felder speak.

PHOTOS BY NORA A. JONES

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"Oh, and then there was the case against the porn artist, and the witness had a distinctive birthmark that would determine her involvement in the films," Felder continued. (If you want to hear the rest of that story, you'll have to ask Felder yourself.)

Another luncheon attendee asked her view of the proposed no-fault divorce legislation.

"The reasons to oppose it have gone away," she said. "WBASNY supports the legislative change and I encourage you to support it."

Other Notes

In her spare time, Felder works with dancers on career transitions. "Whether from injury or age, most dancers need a second career," she admitted.

She is also very active in the matrimonial bar, writing and lecturing on numerous topics.

"I worked with Myrna on a couple of statewide appellate practice seminars for the NYSBA Committee," said Tom Collins, one of the luncheon attendees. "Her matrimonial practice often involves appellate court motions and stays, so she was the natural expert to speak on the arcane and varied motion/stay rules of the Appellate Divisions."