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— and housework

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Des Moines lawyer Roxanne  
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# Roxanne Conlin vs. Injustice

## She fights racism and sexism – and she doesn't do dishes

By Jenny McCuen

When Roxanne Conlin was a sophomore in high school, she wanted to be a movie star. Her homeroom nun at St. Joseph's Academy in Des Moines was appalled.

"She didn't want me to go to Hollywood and become wicked," Conlin says. "So she talked to me quite a bit about becoming a lawyer, thinking that would use my flair for the dramatic and my brain at the same time.

"And it seemed like it would be a good idea. She didn't mention that it would be harder for me because I was female, and perhaps she didn't know. But there were times when I thought of calling her and saying, 'What in the world were you thinking?'"

At 16, Conlin entered Drake University; at 21, she graduated from Drake law school.

She says going to law school opened her eyes to the status of women under the law, and she's been fighting to change people's minds, attitudes and the law ever since.

For the past seven years, she's been working on a class-action antitrust case against Microsoft. On Feb. 14, after nine weeks in court, they settled. The settlement will be announced at a hearing on April 20.

"While it was wonderful to move the law forward in that way, all of a sudden it was me versus Microsoft," Conlin says. "And it took seven years – almost to the day – for that case, and I will not undertake anything like that again. It was all-consuming, seven days a week, 16, 18, 20 hours a day for almost two full years up to and including the trial."

Some thought she'd retire when the case was over. ➤



Photo by James D. Fidler

*"I was one of only three women in law school; I was not accepted, and I was very lonely," says Roxanne Conlin, fresh from her Microsoft lawsuit. "Being a lawyer and being a female was mutually inconsistent."*

"I'll never retire," Conlin says. "I love what I do. Why would I? Unless health or something like that forces me to, I have absolutely no intention of ever leaving the practice of law. They can carry me out with my boots on."

### By the book

This determined attitude is perfectly in character for a woman whose goal as a child growing up in Sioux City-Leeds was to read every single book in the library. Before her family moved to Des Moines in seventh grade, she was up to the Ms.

In fourth grade, she became very interested in Shakespeare, thanks to Charles and Mary Lamb's summaries of Shakespeare's works.

"I actually applied to be on the '\$64,000 Question,' and shortly before the scandal I was going through the process of becoming a candidate – a fourth-grader who read Shakespeare," Conlin says.

She still loves to read.

"I used to go to garage sales and buy boxes of books on whatever subject that family was interested in," she says.

After the Microsoft case was settled, she read 10 to 12 books.

"I have a library of books I have read that I think I need to keep," she says. "Mostly I give my books away. When I read them, I'm done with them and they're not really worth keeping for the most part."

### 'I had to be better'

Being a fast reader (and needing little sleep) was one of the reasons Conlin graduated from law school quickly, even though she was working full time (sometimes 60 hours a week).

"I was one of only three women in law school; I was not accepted, and I was very lonely," she says. "I always

felt that I had to be better than the best in order to be good enough to stay."

After graduation, Conlin practiced as a public lawyer, and three years out of law school she became an assistant attorney general. She was assigned to work with the newly created Iowa Civil Rights Commission and tried the first case under the Iowa Civil Rights Act.

of someone other than the criminal.

### Adopting her own model

When Conlin became a lawyer, there weren't other women lawyers to look to as examples.

"Being a lawyer and being a female was mutually inconsistent – and so for a while I thought I needed to be

sacrificing everything," Conlin says. "We don't do the things that are possible to do to make our families sounder."

When Conlin had two young children, she was able to work part time as assistant attorney general.

"I just wasn't good at staying at home, but I also wasn't good at leaving behind two babies that I personally made and that I wanted to raise," she says.

She and her husband, James Conlin, have four children and five grandchildren.

They met while she was in law school. She was working as a waitress at the Holiday Inn South, and one of her classmates sent James to meet her while she was working.

He was the first man she met who wasn't threatened by the fact that she was in law school and who didn't want to change her.

"And I said to him for some reason very early in our conversation, 'Well, you know, I don't wash, I don't iron, I don't cook, I don't clean and I never will,' and it seemed to be fine with him, so I married him.

"We met on Friday, we got our license to marry on Monday, it appeared in the paper on Wednesday, I had to break a date on Thursday, and we were going to get married on Saturday, but my parents just went nuts, so we delayed it for a week," Conlin says.

A justice of the peace married them in a back room with peeling linoleum.

In 1994, when they celebrated their 30th anniversary, they had a "re-wedding." She wore a dress flown in from Paris and they invited friends from all over the world.

"Forty-three years later. I congratulate myself on my 19-year-old wisdom." □

**'For a while I thought I needed to be manlier. That was not helpful. I swore – my mother was just so appalled.'**

"I tried it really badly," she says. "I was a bad lawyer. But it was one that even a very bad lawyer could not lose, so I didn't lose it, but it was only because it was so obvious.

"Since that time, I've tried hundreds of civil rights cases. That first case was easy. Since then, discrimination still exists, racism still exists, sexism still exists, but they are underground in a way that makes it more difficult to prove."

Her firm, Roxanne Conlin & Associates, focuses on civil right cases, personal injury cases and third-party criminal cases – ones involving crime committed because of the negligence

manlier," she says. "That was not helpful. I swore – my mother was just so appalled. I tried to do things to adopt what I thought was the male model, and I found it so unsatisfying. So I decided that I would make my way as the person I was – take it or leave it."

At her office, women can bring their babies to work with them. She says they love having the babies around and it doesn't hinder the work environment at all.

"We need to make ourselves a child-centered society, and women who choose to work outside the home should be able to do so without