

THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA



2006  
Loren Miller  
Legal Services  
Award



*Joan Messing Graff*

*“Joan has consistently been a tireless and passionate voice for those who have been penalized and unrepresented in the established economic and legal systems. Her compassion, commitment, intellect and advocacy have resulted in practical and sustainable improvements in the lives of thousands of people.”*

— Judge Nancy L. Davis & Judge Donna J. Hitchens  
San Francisco Superior Court

**Joan Messing Graff** has dedicated her entire legal career towards helping to secure and protect the rights of those who would otherwise lack access to the legal system. Her career began in 1968 as an attorney in the General Counsel's office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Washington D.C. In 1970, she moved to San Francisco and became a co-founder of and staff attorney for Equal Rights Advocates (ERA). At ERA, Ms. Graff focused on representing low-wage women workers seeking to enter blue-collar work, the trades, and other nontraditional jobs.

For the past 25 years, Ms. Graff has been the Executive Director of the Legal Aid Society of San Francisco-Employment Law Center (LAS-ELC). She is the first woman to lead the organization, which was founded in 1916 and is the oldest legal aid agency west of the Rockies. During the course of her tenure, the LAS-ELC has worked at the local, state, and national level to improve the lives and economic self-sufficiency of hundreds of thousands of low-income individuals and their families, and achieved positive change for low-wage workers on a systemic level. The LAS-ELC has become a nationally recognized legal services organization for both its direct services to the working poor including free legal clinics in San Francisco, San Jose, and Berkeley, and its expertise in the full array of both California and federal employment laws. Under Ms. Graff's leadership, the LAS-ELC has grown and provided services to an ever-increasing clientele, meeting this need by successfully increasing the level of charitable giving from law firms, businesses, foundations, and individuals.

Ms. Graff's achievements at the LAS-ELC also include creating effective initiatives in response to community needs and issues; mentoring students to create a new generation of public interest law practitioners; and establishing and developing core programs on critical working poor issues in the areas of community legal services; racial equality; gender equity; national origin, immigration, and language rights; and disability rights. The LAS-ELC has been a major catalyst and participant in making possible the passage of laws such as the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, California Family Rights Act, and most recently, California's landmark Paid Family Leave Act.

Under her direction, the LAS-ELC has initiated and/or co-counseled many precedent-setting litigation matters, some of which led to groundbreaking decisions including:

- *California Federal Savings and Loan Ass'n v. Guerra*: A 1987 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that protected the right of pregnant women in California to take an unpaid pregnancy disability leave and return to work.
- *Davis, et al. v. City and County of San Francisco*: A landmark class action in 1987 that resulted in the integration of women and racial minorities into the San Francisco Fire Department.
- *Barnett v. U.S. Airways*: A U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2002 that broadly defined the right to reasonable accommodation for persons who can no longer perform their jobs due to on-the-job injuries or worsening medical conditions.
- *Rivera et al v. NIBCO, Inc.*: In a precedent-setting opinion with nationwide ramifications, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled in 2004 that 23 immigrant workers who filed civil rights claims against their employer alleging discrimination based on national origin and language could not be forced to submit to defense inquiries regarding their immigration status.

In addition to providing critical leadership in her own organization, Ms. Graff has set a high standard of excellence in community outreach, advocacy, and litigation for all legal services programs. She served for several years as Board Chair for Women In Apprenticeship; was an active member of the Coalition for the Medical Rights of Women; is a long-time board member and past president of the Public Interest Clearinghouse; and served on the Board of Directors of the Bar Association of San Francisco, co-chairing its Equality Committee. She currently serves on the advisory board for the Equal Justice Society and continues to be an important figure in the growth and expansion of the community by playing key roles in vision-setting, collaboration, and mentorship.

The Loren Miller Legal Services Award was created in 1977 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the State Bar of California. The award is given annually and honors an attorney who has demonstrated long-term commitment to legal services and who has personally done significant work in extending legal services to the poor.



*The State Bar  
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