

Obituaries

Mary Ellen Abrecht, early female beat cop who became a D.C. Superior Court judge, dies at 72

By [Bart Barnes](#)

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1968 was an inauspicious year to become a police officer. Vietnam War protesters and police battled each other on the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention that summer. The conflict played out on national television and in newspapers. Militant activists of all colors and counterculture followers known as hippies routinely referred to police officers as “pigs.”

Despite the tension on the street, Mary Ellen Abrecht — newly married, newly minted with a college degree in religion and newly arrived in Washington — came across a police help-wanted flier and took a chance on it.

Within a few years, she played a pivotal role in dispelling a firmly entrenched notion on the local force that women, usually placed on desk assignments, were too fragile for the rigors of uniformed policing of the city’s streets.

Mrs. Abrecht, who helped manage and coordinate a pilot program of 100 female police officers on the beat in 1972 and later became a prosecutor with the U.S. attorney’s office in Washington and a Superior Court judge, died Aug. 16 at her home in Washington. She was 72, and the cause was metastatic breast cancer, said her husband, Gary L. Abrecht, a former D.C. police deputy chief who retired as chief of the U.S. Capitol Police.

In her book “The Making of a Woman Cop,” Mrs. Abrecht described how in December 1968, as one of the steps in becoming a police officer, a sergeant handed her a black .38 Smith and Wesson service revolver.

Within the District, she was told, she would have her gun handy at all times: “When you go to a wedding you wear your gun. When you attend church you take your weapon.”

By the early 1970s, the women’s rights movement was gaining prominence, and police departments across the country were facing pressure to expand opportunities for women. Washington, like most big-city police departments, had long had female officers, but they were mostly exempt from patrol duty. They did not walk a beat or wear uniforms.

Against internal opposition from many male supervisors, D.C. Police Chief Jerry V. Wilson decided to try out 100 women on patrol, and he chose Mrs. Abrecht as his coordinator on the project.

It would be “the crucial test of real equality,” Mrs. Abrecht wrote in her book, published in 1976 soon after she left the force to pursue a legal career. “Patrol work was the background of the entire police service. It meant walking the beat.”

It also meant getting women into police uniforms. Without uniforms, she noted, women “could not be recognized as police officers.”

Wilson, now 90 and long retired, recalled those early 1970s experiments with women as patrol officers and Mrs. Abrecht’s troubleshooting role as his coordinator.

“She gave me good advice,” Wilson said in a telephone conversation this week. There was a time, he said, when she intervened to allow women to wear pants instead of skirts as part of their cold-weather uniform. She also learned of attempts by precinct commanders to sabotage the patrol project and brought it to the chief’s attention.

In 1972, Mrs. Abrecht, then a sergeant in the patrol division, was the subject of a “60 Minutes” profile on CBS.

As a street cop, she said, “no one has attacked me personally,” and “you don’t always have to fight.” Some of the opposition to full equality for policewomen, she said, came from female officers who realized that equality, in some cases, meant giving up “protection and special treatment.”

Mary Ellen Benson was born in South Hadley, Mass., on Dec. 18, 1945. Her father worked for the Farm Credit Administration, and her mother was a laboratory assistant at the all-women’s Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley.

She graduated in 1967 from Mount Holyoke College and then spent a year of graduate study at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

While working as a D.C. police officer, she lectured around the country on equal treatment and opportunities for female police officers. She graduated from Georgetown University’s law school in 1974 and left the police force the next year.

She spent the next 15 years as a prosecutor in the U.S. attorney’s office for the District of Columbia, until her appointment as a Superior Court judge in 1990. She presided over family, civil and criminal trials, taking senior status for 12 years in 2003 to work part time.

As a senior judge, she took special delight in officiating over same-sex weddings, which were legalized in the District in 2009. She was a colored-pencil artist and a docent at the Supreme Court, where she gave lectures and conducted tours.

In addition to her husband, of Washington, survivors include two daughters, Karen Tompros of Boston and Rachel Abrecht-Litchfield of Washington; two sisters; a brother and five grandchildren.

Twenty years after she made her first arrest as a police officer, Mrs. Abrecht was officiating at a Superior Court proceeding when the same man came before her once again as an arrestee. She remembered his name because it was an unusual spelling.

“Do you remember being arrested by a policewoman in 1969?” a [Capitol Hill history project](#) quoted her as having said. “It was me.”

“His eyes lit up, and he said ‘yes.’”

“But the saddest thing about his reaction is he was so pleased to be somebody who was recognized. . . . It was, ‘I’m somebody. This judge knows who I am.’ It was just very sad.”

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