

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

URSULA IRMGARD KETTLEWELL SPILGER

October 11, 1974



Ursula Irmgard Kettlewell Spilger was born on October 26, 1940 in Germany. In 1953, when she was 13, her family immigrated to the United States because her father, a German scientist, was invited by the U.S. government to work in the space program. Spilger attended the University of California at Berkeley and graduated in 1962 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in German and Humanities. In the following year she received her teaching credential from Berkeley.

When her husband, Richard Kettlewell, took a job at Boise Cascade in 1968, Spilger settled in Boise. Soon she became involved in Ada County politics and met several lawyers. During that time she also took a Business Law class at Boise State University that she found fascinating. That interest grew through many discussions with her political lawyer friends about topics covered in the Business Law class. Another exposure to the legal practice happened in 1969, when her father died unexpectedly and she worked with a lawyer handling his estate.

Spilger decided to go to law school in 1971 with the encouragement of an informal group of women friends who assembled to study the feminist movement. Because she was living in Boise at the time, she applied to the University of Idaho. Recently divorced and with two small children, ages 3 and 6, Spilger began her studies at the University of Idaho College of Law, one of about 12 women in her class.

After her first year, Spilger clerked for the summer at the Boise law firm of Eberle Berlin. Ted Eberle hired her as a clerk after having worked with her on a project before law school.

Spilger graduated law school in 1974. She immediately sat for the Idaho Bar and on October 11, 1974, Spilger was admitted as the 47th woman in Idaho. After graduation, she went to work at the Idaho Attorney General's office working as a Deputy Attorney General in natural resources division. Focusing primarily on natural resource litigation, Spilger traveled throughout the state. But, she recalls, that not once during the five years that she did this work all over Idaho did she see another woman lawyer in court – not as opposing counsel, not as third-party counsel and certainly not as a judge.

Being a Democrat, Spilger says that she was lucky to survive the transition from a Democrat to Republican Attorney General, but was not so lucky when the second Republican Attorney General was elected. She left the Attorney General's office in March 1979 to teach business law at BSU. While there, Spilger took business classes and eventually earned an MBA.

In 1988, after remarrying, Spilger moved to Houston, Texas, with her husband and decided to go back to law school for her advanced degrees. She graduated from the University of Houston-Downtown with a double LL.M. in International Economic Law and Environmental Law in 1991.

Spilger began teaching full-time at the University of Houston-Downtown in 1990, and continues to teach there today. In 1998, Spilger began serving as the director of the UHD-Model United Nations program. She also regularly teaches International Law and German law at a German University in Mosbach, the Berufs Akademi Mosbach. In fact, Spilger will miss the Bar's tribute to the First 50 Women admitted in Idaho on March 10, 2005, because she will be teaching in Germany for most of the month of March 2005.

In addition to her career successes, Spilger is also an accomplished athlete who regularly participates in triathlons and marathons.