LOUISE RAGGIO ■ 1919-2011

Farm girl from Austin became champion for Texas women's rights

By Joe Simnacher
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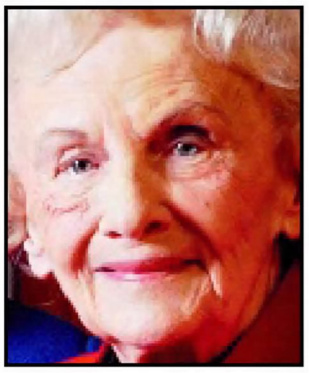

Louise Raggio
Lawyer set precedents in Dallas career.

Louise Hilma Ballerstedt Raggio, the trailblazing Dallas lawyer instrumental in winning equal legal rights for Texas women, has died at the age of 91.

Raggio, who was born in Austin and was class valedictorian at Austin High School in 1935, was a nationally known force in women's rights. But she maintained a lower profile in Texas, where she needed to work for change within a conservative political environment.

Raggio also managed to meld a successful professional life with her personal obligations to her family and young people, especially female law students, who included former White House counsel Harriet Miers of Dallas.

Longtime friend Virginia Whitehill of Dallas said that for years she has told women's gatherings, "Louise Raggio is the most important woman alive in the state of Texas."

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RAGGIO: 1967 law ended legal discrimination against married Texas women

Pictured in about 1975, Louise Raggio made history when she won a criminal case with an all-woman jury in Dallas County.

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"And I stand by that," she said.

Raggio didn't set out to blaze a trail for women's rights. She was born in her maternal grandfather's house in Austin, the daughter of Swedish and German immigrants. She grew up on a cotton farm between Elgin and Manor.

During high school, she and her mother lived with relatives in Austin so she could attend classes where paved city streets eliminated the chance her education would be bogged down by dirt country roads that could become useless after a heavy rain.

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She also overcame the community sentiment at the time that educating a poor farm girl was a waste.

In 1939, she graduated magna cum laude from the University of Texas, with a bachelor's degree and a teacher's certificate. While on a Rockefeller fellowship in public administration at American University in Washington in 1941, she met and married Grier Raggio, a lawyer who died in 1988.

After World War II, Louise Raggio continued her education by attending night law school in Dallas at her husband's urging. She earned her law degree and forged a precedent-setting legal career, becoming the first female assistant district attorney in Dallas County.

Raggio was the first woman to prosecute a criminal case there. And she once won a criminal case with an all-woman jury in Dallas County. The verdict made news all over Texas because women had only recently been allowed to sit on juries.

"It had been in the paper that the streets wouldn't be safe because (female jurors) would be so soft-hearted and turn all these criminals loose," Raggio recalled.

She later joined her husband in private practice, where she took giant steps for all women. Frustrated by archaic Texas law that required her to get her husband's signature each time she filed a legal document, she became the ramrod behind the Marital Property Act of 1967, which eliminated centuries of accumulated legal discrimination against Texas women.

At the time, Texas women ceded control of their personal bank accounts and real estate once they married. They could not borrow money without their husband's signature.

The establishment "knew we had to get rid of this if Texas was to be an industrial state," Raggio had said. "An employer couldn't hire a single woman and worry if she were going to get married."

Raggio became chairman of the State Bar of Texas' family law panel, another of her firsts, and lobbied the Texas Bar to support the changes. She then found grant money to fund the drafting of a bill, which she shepherded through the Legislature.

Raggio is survived by three sons, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Visitation will be 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday at Sparkman/Hillcrest Funeral Home in Dallas. A memorial will be at 2 p.m. Sunday at the First Unitarian Church, 4015 Normandy Ave. in Dallas.