

Opening Statement of Mary E. Sommer

Thank you, Senator. Good morning/afternoon, Chairman McDonald, Chairman Lawlor and Members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Mary Sommer, and it is truly a pleasure to appear before you. I am humbled to be considered for a position on the Connecticut Superior Court. I thank Governor Rell for putting my name before you. I appreciate the time and effort the Committee devotes to this important task and thank you also.

I was born in Syracuse, New York to parents who married when my father returned from serving as an ensign in World War II. I was the first of their 8 children and nothing I have or will achieve can equal my parents' accomplishment in raising 8 children who remain close and will do anything for each other. Having educated 8 children through undergraduate and graduate degrees, my mother earned her bachelors degree at the age of 75. My father still runs the engineering firm he started after he retired. They both volunteer several days a week at St. Vincent's Hospital in Bridgeport. Their hard work and service to others were part of my youth and remain vital examples to me today.

Leaving upstate New York, I attended grammar school on Long Island, moved to Fairfield where my parents still live and graduated from Notre Dame High School in Bridgeport. An academic scholarship paid part of my expenses at the College of New Rochelle but in order to pay for the rest, I worked 3 jobs during vacations, logging 90+ hour work weeks including work as a lifeguard, truly a trailblazing profession at the time.

I began college as an art major but events of the sixties stimulated a growing interest in social justice and a desire to pursue a career in which I could use my intellect and problem solving skills to help others. I also was determined to explore a more diverse world beyond the campus. The fall of my junior year, I participated in a program at the United Nations two days a week while carrying a full courseload at the College of New Rochelle. Following the UN

semester, I studied in London. Foreign study was rare in those days, no cell phones, email, internet or even international ATMs. Living in a foreign country reinforced my appreciation of the liberties we Americans enjoy under our constitution and confirmed my desire to study law. Not knowing any lawyers, I needed a plan and the means to realize it. Thus, after graduating with honors from the College of New Rochelle a semester early in December of my senior year, I worked as a paralegal in New York City. This was an important and formative step between my undergraduate education and the University of Notre Dame Law School.

I began my career at the formation of the defense firm of Bai Pollock & Dunnigan. During those watershed years I was involved in major complex litigation statewide and tried more cases to conclusion in the first few years than many lawyers do in a lifetime. These included evolving product liability, medical negligence and insurance litigation. Treated as a peer and held to the highest ethical and professional standards, I was fortunate to receive such broad training early in my career from accomplished trial lawyers and judges across the state.

At Cohen & Wolf my practice expanded to commercial litigation, housing and family law and I used skills honed as a defense lawyer to represent plaintiffs.

As corporation counsel for the City of Stamford I added experience in municipal law to my field of practice and developed administrative skills required to manage the city's law department and provide counsel to its agencies and boards. I truly loved working for the people of the City on ever challenging and unpredictable issues. However, in 1990 my husband Jay Sandak and I took on a new challenge and formed Sandak Friedman & Sommer which is now Sandak Hennessey & Greco and has 16 lawyers concentrating on all levels of civil litigation and land use. The growth and diversification of the firm has enabled me to expand my knowledge in an environment litigating for clients ranging from major corporations to the infant whom I'm presently representing pro bono in juvenile court.

It has also enabled me to participate in a meaningful way in a variety of bar programs and pro bono service. In 1996, a colleague and I decided to make holidays brighter for children in our community. Twelve years and thousands of toys later, the Fairfield County bar is part of an annual Christmas celebration for families at the Yerwood Center in Stamford. Since 1996, our "Send Your Suits Back To Work" professional clothing drives have enabled people to return to work with dignity. Recently helping to establish the Fairfield County Bar Foundation has reinforced these goals of expanding the commitment of the bar to reach even more individuals and to make justice more widely available.

I have also served as a volunteer Special Master in Federal Court and State Attorney Trial Referee, having heard over 40 cases, several of which have been affirmed on appeal, on the Statewide Grievance Committee and the Public Service and Trust Commission for the judicial branch. It has been an honor to have had these opportunities to volunteer in the profession and I have benefited greatly from each of them.

This year my husband Jay who is here with me today and I will celebrate our 30th anniversary. Since moving to Stamford in 1985, I have served the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut and many other community organizations, been PFO and school board president, perennial brownie baker, den leader and soccer/baseball/lacrosse mom to my three sons who are now adults following their own dreams in Washington, DC, Chicago and Colorado.

Teaching has been an integral and rewarding part of my career. While at Notre Dame, I taught in the freshman writing program, developing a curriculum called Human Rights in Law and Literature which compared issues such as civil rights and rights of the handicapped in plays and novels with case law. Teaching business law and ethics in the 1990's allowed me to relate ethical issues to intellectual property, employment, environmental, antitrust and business criminal law at a time when headlines were being made daily. Like most teachers, I learned

from my students. At the College of New Rochelle, most of my students were the first in their families to attend college. Because I taught at night, many of my students came to class after working and caring for families. I was inspired by their determination to learn and overcome obstacles and hope that I, in turn, inspired them to believe in themselves and achieve. The evenings I spent with those young women were among the most satisfying of my legal career.

I firmly believe that every case is important to those involved, and that every party, whether a multinational company represented by a team of lawyers or an individual appearing on his or her own behalf, has the same rights under our laws, deserves the same respect and is entitled to a fair and just resolution. If confirmed I will continue this commitment in my role as a judge. I have sought the challenge of learning whether it is new areas of law, technical issues of a client's case, building a law firm or creating a culture of service among my peers. My practice has involved a broad spectrum of clients and an equally broad range of litigated matters, including litigation over the sale of an international cable business, land use, employment, traumatic brain injury and civil rights cases. I have tried cases in state and federal courts, handled arbitrations and administrative hearings and argued appeals before the Connecticut Supreme Court and the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. If confirmed, I will have much to learn, not just in the beginning, but every day that I am fortunate to serve the people of Connecticut. As much as I have thoroughly enjoyed many years of service in the community, teaching, practicing law and building a firm, I look forward to serving the public and if confirmed, promise you that I will undertake the responsibilities of a superior court judge with humility, integrity and fairness to all.