



NEW YORK CITY LAW DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE CORPORATION COUNSEL

Michael A. Cardozo, *Corporation Counsel*

Press Release

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*For Immediate Release*

**RETIRING ATTORNEY EDITH SPIVACK, 94, TO BE HONORED TONIGHT  
AT CITY HALL FOR 70 YEARS OF PUBLIC SERVICE TO NEW YORK CITY**

***A LAW DEPARTMENT STAFF MEMBER SINCE THE FIORELLO LAGUARDIA ADMINISTRATION IN 1934,  
ONE OF THE FIRST FEMALE LAWYERS IN NEW YORK CITY  
AND ONE OF – IF NOT THE – LONGEST-SERVING CITY EMPLOYEE EVER,  
SPIVACK IS KNOWN AS OFFICE “MAVEN” AND “MENSCH-ETTE”***

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New York, Dec. 13, 2004 – Edith I. Spivack, a Law Department attorney since the first year of the Fiorello La Guardia Administration in 1934 and a pioneer lawyer who was one of the first female attorneys in New York City, is “officially” retiring at age 94 after 70 years of public service. Spivack will be honored with a commendation tonight during the Law Department’s annual awards ceremony, and the office’s “Special Recognition Awards” for outstanding attorney service will be renamed the “Edith Spivack Special Recognition Awards.” Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who will attend the event, will make a presentation to Spivack and speak of her longstanding commitment to New York City. The event starts at 5 p.m. in the City Council Chamber at City Hall, and is open to the press.

“It is an honor for me to recognize Edith Spivack’s 70 years of exemplary service to the Law Department and the City,” Mayor Bloomberg noted. “Edith is apparently the longest-serving New York City employee in recent memory, if not of all time. She is a great inspiration to the City – and part of what makes this City great.”

Michael A. Cardozo, the City’s Corporation Counsel, added: “Edith has served as a role model and pioneer for women attorneys throughout New York, and has put her matchless experience to good use in guiding a new generation of lawyers who now represent the City’s interests. It has been my pleasure to work with Edith and gain from her expertise. We are all in her debt for her devotion and dedication.”

Spivack, who until just recently had been commuting almost two hours each way to attend the office’s weekly Executive Staff advisory meeting and who also had been working on a Law Department history archive project, concludes a long and accomplished legal career that spanned the incumbencies of 10 Mayors and 23 Corporation Counsels. Her work with the Law Department began in the years of the Great Depression; continued through World War II and the turbulent post-War years; included an appearance before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1970 on a real estate tax exemption case; continued through the City’s fiscal crisis in the 1970s; and has culminated in the City’s renaissance in recent years. She retired from full-time City service at age 85 in 1995 and was recognized with a special *Executive Assistant Emerita* title – but she continued to work in an advisory capacity at the Law Department for subsequent years with such enthusiasm and dedication that staff didn’t consider her “officially” retired.

Spivack is also known affectionately in the office as the Law Department’s “maven,” given her kindly, sage legal advice offered to any attorney seeking it, as well as the office “mensch-ette,” given her propensity to advise Law Department staff to embrace work-life balances and to play matchmaker with

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colleagues who she feels “might hit it off” (no marriages yet, though she’s still trying). Spivack’s colorful background includes many amusing anecdotes:

- Although considered an “odddity” as a female law student, she embraced learning and was taught by top professors at Columbia, including Karl Llewellyn, one of the great legal scholars of the 20th Century.
- After graduating from Columbia Law School in 1932, Spivack took a job with a private law firm – but was “discharged” (a.k.a. fired) when her boss realized she was getting married. She later balanced raising two daughters with her full-time legal career.
- In order to become employed by the Law Department, Spivack had to *volunteer* her services as an attorney in the then Workmens’ Compensation Division (now Workers’ Compensation) to first prove her mettle. Later, with the assistance of another prominent female attorney, Justine Wise Tulin Polier – who later became a Family Court judge – Spivack helped restore efficiency and honesty to that division after a kickback scandal.
- She attended a traditional Jewish bris for a young boy named Victor A. Kovner in 1937, only to have him become the Law Department’s Corporation Counsel – and her boss – in 1990.
- Edith interviewed and recruited a talented young attorney in 1970 named Jeffrey D. Friedlander, who today has become the office’s second-in-command and who in January received the state’s highest commendation for public service “with Edith as my mentor,” according to Friedlander.

In musing on her career in the Law Department’s 2002-2003 Annual Report, Spivack said, “I have a strong love and bond for this office – and I am gratified to be contributing to this City.” She also discussed the various municipal and legal changes that have occurred in her 70 years of service to New York City. Among these have included:

- The now-widespread presence of female attorneys, which was practically non-existent during Spivack’s early career.
- The emergence of new areas of law, including whole divisions, like Environmental Law, that had never previously existed in the Corporation Counsel’s or in the law in general.
- The complexity of matters that now come before the Law Department and the City, including, for example, same-sex marriage questions, the concept of New York City hosting the Olympics and fallout from the World Trade Center’s destruction. (Ground Zero is less than two blocks from the Law Department’s headquarters, where Spivack maintained her office until earlier this month).

Spivack’s career at the New York City Law Department has been long and accomplished. She graduated from the Columbia Law School in 1932, one of the first women to do so. She became an Assistant Corporation Counsel in 1934, the first year of the Fiorello LaGuardia Administration. She joined the Workmens’ Compensation Division, which had been tainted by corruption and inefficiency during the mayoralty of Jimmie Walker in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She and her division chief, Justine Wise Tulin Polier, restored order and integrity to the division, which was responsible for compensation claims by injured City workers. “It is remarkable to note that she went without pay as a volunteer for the first part of 1934, getting onto the City payroll only after proving her ability,” noted Corporation Counsel Cardozo.

In 1944, Spivack began what was to be over 30 years of service in the Law Department’s Real Estate Tax Division. At first a generalist, she developed a special expertise in appeals of real estate tax assessments. Her legal highlights included:

- Representing the City in many appeals involving some of the most valuable real estate in New York City. Among the many notable cases in her career was the Penn Central Railroad’s bankruptcy in the early 1970s. Her efforts in that case resulted in the City’s collection of many millions of dollars in real estate taxes. That victory was critical to the City’s financial well-being, particularly given the City’s dire financial straits at the time.

- Negotiating loans that kept the City out of bankruptcy during the fiscal crisis that struck the City in the mid-1970s
- Representing the City before the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1970 case of *Walz v. Tax Commission*. In that instance, the Supreme Court found real estate tax exemptions for religious organizations to be constitutional, rejecting a First Amendment challenge to those exemptions.

In 1976, Spivack assumed a supervisory position on the Law Department's Executive Staff. In that position, she oversaw several divisions of the Law Department and advised numerous Corporation Counsels on matters requiring the wise exercise of discretion. The smooth functioning of the Tax Divisions under her supervision contributed to the City's fiscal rebound in the 1980s. While a supervisor, she also continued to appear before appellate courts on behalf of the City in cases involving real estate taxes. She served in her supervisory position until her retirement at age 85 in 1995. After that time, Spivack continued coming to the office until just earlier this month, when she decided to take a rest from City service at age 94.

"These years of service, though commenced after she had retired, provided Edith's younger colleagues at the Law Department with the benefit of her matchless experience, endless exuberance and grandmotherly concern," Cardozo noted.

In addition to her commitment to the Law Department, Spivack has served long and honorably on the Bar Associations of New York City and New York State. Given her experience as a woman pioneer in the law, she took great interest in matters relating to women and the practice of law. Since 1997, the New York County Lawyers Association annually bestows its Edith I. Spivack Award to one or more attorneys for outstanding contributions to the advancement of women in the legal profession.

Spivack's longtime Law Department colleagues have reflected on her career and cited how it has inspired them. Jeffrey D. Friedlander, the office's First Assistant Corporation Counsel and second-in-command, came to the Law Department in 1970. "Edith interviewed and recruited me when I first came here," Friedlander said, noting he has worked with Spivack for 24 years. "Edith's energy, expertise and insight continues to motivate us 'newcomers' – and we are thankful to have had her leadership. She has never ceased to be an invaluable mentor to me."

Spivack herself best summed up her Law Department work in a phone interview last night leading up to today's event. "My career with the City has been a gratifying, enriching experience. All my years of service to the Law Department are something of which I am very proud."

She added, "In addition to urging young folks to consider the benefits of a career in public service, I suggest them to make it a lifelong calling, as I have. I'm proof of the rewards you can gain."

The New York City Law Department is one of the oldest, largest and most dynamic law offices in the world, ranking among the top three largest law offices in New York City and the top three largest public law offices in the country. Tracing its roots back to the 1600's, the Department's 650-plus lawyers handle more than 90,000 cases and transactions each year in 17 separate legal divisions. The Corporation Counsel heads the Law Department and acts as legal counsel for the Mayor, elected officials, the City and all its agencies. The Department's attorneys represent the City on a vast array of civil litigation, legislative and legal issues and in the criminal prosecution of juveniles. Its web site can be accessed through the City government home page at [www.nyc.gov](http://www.nyc.gov) or via direct link at [www.nyc.gov/html/law/home.html](http://www.nyc.gov/html/law/home.html).

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