

Sylvia Walbolt Retires: More than 60 Years of Breaking Barriers in Law

By Lisa Willis

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Sylvia Walbolt, a legal pioneer and Carlton Fields shareholder, has retired after a career spanning more than 60 years, leaving an indelible mark on Florida's legal landscape.

As the first female attorney at Carlton Fields, Walbolt broke barriers in a male-dominated field, arguing for change in Florida's same-sex marriage and adoption laws, and securing reversals of \$1 billion judgments.

Joining the firm in 1963 as its 12th lawyer, Walbolt was the sole woman in her University of Florida law school class, graduating first in her class. Later, she became Carlton Fields' first female partner, a distinction that often came with great anxiety in the early days.

"Being the only female in the room, except for perhaps the court reporter, had this additional feeling, not only with respect to the anxiety over the actual work you were doing, but the fact that everybody was looking at you as if you were an oddity," Walbolt said. "Why is she in this room? Did she bring the coffee and forget to leave?"



Courtesy photo

Sylvia H. Walbolt (retired) of Carlton Fields.

Over the decades, Walbolt held groundbreaking roles, including chair of the firm's Board of Directors, the first female president of the Florida Bar Foundation, the first woman in a leadership position in the ABA Section of Antitrust Law, and the second woman elected to the American College of Trial Lawyers.

Walbolt's courtroom prowess as head of Carlton Fields' Appellate Practice and Trial Support Group earned her a reputation as a titan of appellate law.

"Sylvia worked tirelessly her whole career to serve the best interests of our firm and our



Sylvia Walbolt (R) and Broaddus Livingston (L) (former president and chair of Carlton Fields) of Carlton Fields.

clients,” said Gary Sasso, President and CEO of Carlton Fields. “She was sought out by our clients for their toughest cases. She was creative, relentless, and deeply invested in our clients’ success. During my 20-year tenure as the firm’s CEO, she would come to me at the start of every year, asking, ‘What more can I do for the firm?’ We will miss her greatly, but we will benefit immensely from her legacy.”

‘I Am a Better Lawyer Because of Her’

Described as a legendary, one-of-a-kind mentor to generations of lawyers, Walbolt mentored

scores of junior attorneys and sometimes even senior attorneys at Carlton Fields over the decades, advising, “I always told them that should be a major goal of theirs, to be active in pro bono.”

“As one of those mentees early in my career, she took me under her wing and trained me in the law,” said Joseph Lang, head of Carlton Fields’ Appellate Practice who succeeded Walbolt following her retirement. “I am a better lawyer because of her and forever grateful for the impact she had on my career. Sylvia led by example and showed countless attorneys the right way to do things in this profession. Maybe more importantly, she took a personal interest in our careers and practices. She truly wanted us to be successful in everything we did.”

Memories for Lang include working on cases with Walbolt and learning her “ways and good habits.”

Some of those cases included appeals across federal and state courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, the Eleventh Circuit, and the Florida Supreme Court, generating hundreds of published opinions.

Her notable victories included 2014 *Gen. Elec. Capital Corp. v. Shattuck*, where she secured the reversal of a \$1.1 billion judgment, and *Morgan Stanley & Co. v. Coleman (Parent) Holdings Inc.* (2007), overturning a \$1.58 billion securities fraud verdict due to insufficient damages proof.

In 2018 *Bechtel Corp. v. Batchelor*, Walbolt won a reversal of a \$12.8 million asbestos liability verdict for a contractor, with the court agreeing the plaintiff failed to prove premises liability.

Walbolt also fought for social justice, challenging Florida's bans on same-sex marriage and adoptions by same-sex couples in the state.

"I joined [the proceedings] with one of my law partners, Jeffrey Cohen, and I'll never forget going into the courtroom. It was filled with people hostile to our position who had been out marching and protesting," Walbolt said. "Before the argument, there were armed policemen lining the courtroom. It was really a scary situation, and I split the argument with my partner. I presented the kind of dry legal argument, and he presented just an absolutely brilliant emotional plea. I still remember him asking the court to 'protect our clients from the tyranny of the majority.' I told him, I wish I had said that as his comment made it into the court's decision."

Walbolt said their clients were grateful.

"One of them said to Jeff and me, after the argument, it was the first time somebody had stood up in court for their rights. It made me very proud that Carlton Fields had done that, because it was not a popular decision at the time," Walbolt said.

A passionate advocate for pro bono work, Walbolt frequently assisted the Eleventh Circuit and Florida Supreme Court in capital cases, representing defendants in high-profile post-conviction proceedings.

Her commitment to equal justice earned her the 2016 John Paul Stevens Guiding Hand of Counsel Award from the ABA's Death

Penalty Representation Project. She mentored junior attorneys, fostering Carlton Fields' pro bono culture.

A former president of the American Academy of Appellate Lawyers, Walbolt wrote extensively on appellate advocacy.

In reflecting back over the decades, what stands out the most in the evolution of the practice, Walbolt said;

"When I walk into a courtroom today, there may be three women sitting on the bench. I may have a woman lawyer on the other side, maybe a woman client sitting next to me. They may be black, they may be Asian, they may be gay," Walbolt said. "It's just so much more diverse of a profession than it was when I started."

The single most striking change she witnessed? Technology.

"When I first started, everything went by mail, so you had some time to think about it before you stamped it and sent it. And even if you sent it, you had time to think about it and maybe pick up the phone and tell the other side, 'don't open that letter, just ignore it,'" Walbolt said. "Nowadays, you're getting emails and texts, and everything has to be responded to immediately. And I just don't think you have the time for reflection that you used to have. I think we suffer from what that does: ... The stress on human beings is just incredible, having to immediately respond to often very complex cases."