

THE
AMERICAN LAWYER'Quiet Authority and Deep Respect':
Judge Shelley Chapman's Empathy, Willingness
to Listen Keys to a Remarkable Career

Judge Chapman, an American Lawyer Lifetime Achievement honoree, worked on many of the largest and most impactful bankruptcies in her era. But her lasting impact is also found in the barriers she broke and the compassion she brought to those pursuits.

By Patrick J. Smith

November 13, 2025

The list of matters U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Shelley Chapman presided over is impressive simply as a list. Lehman Brothers. Boston Generating. Sbarro. Century 21. Philippine Airlines. The list of mediation matters she has worked is equally so. Windstream. Purdue Pharma. Rite Aid. The Diocese of Rochester.

But regardless of the matter, Chapman believed that the parties—regardless of social status, finances or power—should be allowed a voice.

"One power you have on the bench is you can enable people to be heard," Chapman said in an interview.

Long Odds

As the first in her family to go to college (and subsequently law school), the first woman partner in the bankruptcy practice at both Sidley Austin



Courtesy photo

Shelley Chapman, senior counsel with Willkie Farr & Gallagher.

and Willkie, Farr & Gallagher, Chapman's success required a series of firsts against long odds.

"I graduated from Harvard Law in 1981, and that is an important piece of who I am, that I went to college and law school on full scholarships," she said. "I was the first person in my family to go to college, and I wasn't familiar with the profes-

sional environment and the world in general. So, I just got out there.”

Three years later, in New York, Chapman was the 13th partner in Sidley’s New York office. She then confronted an issue that many women in Big Law, especially during that time period, had to wrestle with.

“I worked at Sidley, then I took two years off to raise the two most wonderful daughters ever,” she said. “I really took off and essentially retired. When my youngest was 10 months old, I decided I wanted to go back to work, but not 24/7. I believe I was among the first, if not the first, person to become a partner in a major New York law firm while working part time. This was before everyone was ‘leaning in.’”

Shortly before she joined Willkie in 2001, Chapman worked on a matter across the table from Matt Feldman, who would later become the chair of Willkie.

“I have known her since the late 1990s,” Feldman said in an interview. “LiveEnt was a theater company in bankruptcy, and I had the company, and Shelley had the bank.”

“To me, she was Darth Vader,” he quipped.

A couple of years later, the firm was swamped with bankruptcy work and wanted a deeper bench. Senior partner Myron Trepper, who Chapman would count as a mentor, said the firm had made a hire from Sidley.

“He said, ‘Good news, we are making a hire from Sidley,’ and I said, ‘Yes, Darth Vader,’” Feldman joked. “She and I immediately teamed up on large cases.”

Feldman went on to say that Chapman was a “pioneer” in the field.

“She was a pioneer in the sense that bankruptcy was—and to some extent still is—a boy’s club,” he said. “She broke that mold and also managed to raise two phenomenal daughters who are professionals”—a doctor and a lawyer—“of their own.”

Chapman would remain at Willkie until 2010, when she was tapped for an open judgeship on the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of New York.

“Back in the day, you still got paged (in the courthouse) by an overhead system,” she recounted. “I got paged, and Judge Gerber was on the phone, and I was wondering what I had done wrong. Instead, he said there is an opening on the SDNY bankruptcy bench, and that I should apply. I was dumbstruck, but I applied. And I got it. It was incredible and surreal. We celebrated by going to a dingy Chinese restaurant close to the courthouse.”

Chapman said the bench at the time was populated by luminaries, such as Judge James Peck, and that it was a little intimidating at first.

“Basically, it was like I joined the Yankees,” she said.

The Judge

Jamie Eisen was a young associate at Willkie when she met Chapman.

“We have worked together for over 20 years,” Eisen said in an interview. “She was the only woman partner in the firm’s restructuring group, and well respected. I was in awe of her from the moment I met her.”

Eisen would leave Willkie with Chapman in 2010 and became Chapman’s career clerk for the duration of her time on the bench.

"I think it [is] important, as someone who watched her in the courtroom, to note that she was always willing to treat people as though they will be heard," Eisen said. "Whether an individual or someone from a company, how important someone was, wasn't tied to their finances. She is willing to listen to those who are speaking. And how she deals with people is also why she has been so successful in mediation."

Eisen evoked a case Chapman had worked on regarding Patriot Coal. The case was initially to be tried in New York, but many of the people affected lived in West Virginia.

"They were writing her personally regarding the case," Eisen said. "She still has the letters. She read every one."

The case was eventually moved to the Eastern District of Missouri, and Chapman was able to get videoconferencing together—no easy lift, prior to the COVID era—so those affected in West Virginia could be heard.

"Her ability to command a room and a courtroom was something I was constantly learning from," Eisen said. "She earns people's respect. Not through force, but through quiet authority and deep respect."

The Mediator and Mentor

Chapman left the bench in 2022, returning to Willkie as special counsel and ramping up her mediation work—something her close friend, Judge Peck, said she had a natural ability for.

"We were at SDNY together, and we became very close as a consequence of that," said Peck,

who, like Chapman, is retired from the bench. "And of course as judges for Lehman Brothers."

Peck, with Morrison & Foerster, said Chapman always had "extra compassion" and is someone who "lives and breathes the issues that she confronts."

"And she is the same way when dealing with friends and family," he added.

In a twist of fate, Peck and Chapman were the subject of an amusing New Yorker article several years back. Chapman and Peck had dinner and were going to see "The Lehman Trilogy," a play that had recently come to the U.S. from the U.K. and chronicled the rise and fall of Lehman Brothers.

"Through circumstances I can't recount, a New Yorker writer (Alexandra Schwarz) recognized us and was following us around," Peck said. "It started at dinner, and every intermission and after the show was over. We were sort of reviewing the play from the perspective of the judges who were close to the story. And we had a rapport and banter that was captured by the author."

Still working on major matters, Chapman said that for those who want to follow in her footsteps, finding a quality mentor—or mentors—is key.

"My general advice would be to seek out good mentors who can guide you to the best work and the best experiences," she said. "Embrace the opportunity you are given. And remember to do good. As a professional in the law, you have an enormous ability to do good and leave a lasting impression."