

# Remembering Janet L. Norwood

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I was privileged to be one of the very few members of my cohort to have a mother with a PhD, which she received before I was born. My earliest memories of my mother, from the time I was three, involve waiting for her to return from her job as a research associate, where she co-authored two articles for an anthology entitled *Studies in United States Commercial Policy*, published by the University of North Carolina Press. I would be so excited anticipating her arrival that I insisted that the woman looking after me accompany me downstairs out to the sidewalk, so that I could see my mother walking the few blocks home from the bus stop, carrying her briefcase, an image still etched in my mind.

My mother's accomplishments are especially striking given that her parents were financially insecure and had been forced to terminate their schooling much too early, although both were highly intelligent and intellectually curious. Her father was forced to leave school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and her mother only had high school. My mother was nearly denied the opportunity to attend college because of the strict anti-Jewish quotas that pervaded American higher education during the interwar period and for years afterward. New Jersey College for Women, the women's division of Rutgers University, initially barred her entry because of the tiny quota assigned to her heavily Jewish northern New Jersey high school. Pressure had to be applied to push her up off of the so-called "waiting list." Decades later (in 1987) Rutgers honored her as one of the seven most distinguished alumni in its history, along with Nobelist Milton Friedman and Paul Robeson.

As a college student during World War II, my mother was already engaged in exploring and analyzing key national and international issues in the first

administrative position she ever held, president of the New Jersey College for Women History, Economics, and Political Science Club. In this capacity she had Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she deeply admired, in to speak.

My mother also was an avid athlete in her teens, playing basketball and softball in 1939 and 1940 for a team with, I think, the best name in women's sports, the Amazons, of Irvington, New Jersey, who played preliminaries before pro basketball games and Harlem Globetrotters exhibitions. Remember that when the All-American Professional Girls' Baseball League was established in 1943, the subject of the movie *A League of Their Own*, it named its teams the Rockford Peaches, the Racine Belles, the Fort Wayne Daisies, and so on. My mother gave me my first baseball glove when I was five, and taught me how to use it.

My mother's objectivity in interpreting data, so much admired and appreciated when she was Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, was already apparent in 1949, when she served, at the age of 25, as an instructor in political science at Wellesley College. One of her students, writing to her at the end of the academic year and thanking her for her "wonderful course," commented: "It's not so much the facts that I found interesting, but it was learning to try to look behind a situation or problem and comprehend more than one argument."

My mother set a very high standard as a public servant, and was always determined to improve things, never tolerating deficiencies or efforts to cover them up. During her first term as BLS Commissioner in 1982, after testifying before the U.S. House of Representatives District of Columbia Committee, she received the following letter from Congressman Stewart McKinney of Connecticut:

“In my eleven years in the U.S. House of Representatives I have found that it is rare indeed to hear testimony from any witness which is not biased, filled with half-truths, or simply silent with respect to discussion of faults in a program. Your testimony concerning the Consumer Price Index, both generally and with respect to its applicability to the District of Columbia’s Federal payment formula, provided me with one of those rare opportunities to receive worthwhile testimony.”

That same year, my mother wrote a letter to me and my wife from Geneva that provides a sense of the stature she achieved internationally, as well as her superb managerial skills. We had lived in Geneva in 1954 and 1955. In this letter, my mother wrote:

“It seems quite unreal to me that 28 years have gone by since we lived on Chemin de Vermont. . . . I must say that the biggest change probably has been in me. From a young mother who had never traveled abroad . . . I [now] have been elected chair of this 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labor Statisticians – the first woman to hold that position” – as she so often was. There were 125 delegates from 60 countries, with simultaneous translation in six languages. My mother remarked: “So far, I’ve managed the sessions quite well. Although it has been quite an experience to hear the delegate from Iran appeal to Allah who [he said] has ‘come down from the heavens to bring about the revolution in Iran which makes discussion of employment or unemployment irrelevant’ or to hear the Soviet delegate claim that unemployment has been entirely eliminated in the USSR. . . . The Arabs did not refuse to seat the Israelis as we had feared. . . . The days are long and the work fatiguing. But I do have a sense that I am making a contribution here.”

In fact, when my mother was BLS Commissioner, many foreign governments sought her advice on gathering and analyzing statistics, and she traveled for consultation to numerous countries, including Israel, China, Hungary, and Peru. She and my father shared interests and assisted each other in their work. In Australia they conducted a joint seminar on the U.S. economy for the Reserve Bank of Australia.

I’d like to close with a final illustration of my mother’s dedication to her work and to public service, reported by the *New York Times* on January 11, 1988 in an article entitled “It’s Only Snow.” The article was accompanied by an illustration of my mother wearing a long scarf trudging through a blizzard with a big smile on her face, carrying a briefcase marked “Commissioner of Labor Statistics.” It read:

“An eight-inch snowstorm that caused an official closing of the Federal Government on Friday was no match for the two main participants in one of Washington’s longest-running public forums. It was the 101<sup>st</sup> monthly appearance by Commissioner of Labor Statistics Janet L. Norwood before the Joint Economic Committee of Congress to explain the latest unemployment figures. Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin has presided on 70 of these occasions.

“Both were determined not to be the cause of a missed performance. Senator Proxmire, who is retiring this year at the age of 72, jogged to work – as is his habit – but because of the bad conditions he took a couple of embarrassing tumbles. Dr. Norwood went home to the suburbs Thursday evening but when the snow started in earnest she and her husband decided to come back and spend the night, at their own expense, at a downtown hotel. She called getting the numbers out on time a bureau ‘tradition.’”