



Bessie Margolin stands on the steps of the Supreme Court building in a Department of Labor photograph. The image accompanied an article titled "Orphanage to Court Career," which was published in the *Dixie, Times-Picayune States Roto Magazine* on January 2, 1955.

By Julie Steinbacher '10

The Little Girl from *New Orleans*

When Marlene Trestman '78 came to Goucher, a successful lawyer named Bessie Margolin took the young college student under her wing. Now Trestman is writing a biography of Margolin, who rose from a Louisiana orphanage to argue cases before the Supreme Court.

The woman in the photograph stands confidently on the steps of the Supreme Court building, the Capitol rising behind her. Her smile is captivating, her gaze warm. Impeccably dressed in a crisp suit with an hourglass jacket and carrying a leather portfolio case, she embodies professionalism and glamour.

For the past eight years, Marlene Trestman '78 has spent countless hours peering at this image and others like it, reading legal briefs, and poring over letters and newspaper articles, searching for insights into this intriguing woman's life. Trestman's subject is Bessie Margolin, a champion of labor law who, in nearly 40 years of practice, successfully argued 25 of 28 cases before the U.S. Supreme Court and is credited with defending the wage and hour rights of millions of Americans. "She was the only woman of her time dreaming up these heady constitutional theories about how to defend the New Deal," Trestman says. "She was a force to be reckoned with."

A lawyer herself, Trestman long has been fascinated by Margolin. Her interest is not altogether surprising: A special assistant to Maryland's attorney general, Trestman is an accomplished law practitioner whose focus has been on protecting consumers. In 2004, she led Maryland's successful prosecution of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. for marketing Kool cigarettes to children with hip-hop music and, in 2007, for using cartoons to sell Camel cigarettes to them; she also leads efforts to prevent youth-targeted marketing of alcoholic beverages. »





Marlene Trestman '78 and her brother, Bob Trestman, sit on the front steps of their home on Annunciation Avenue in the St. Thomas Housing Project in New Orleans, La., circa 1960.

Trestman isn't merely fascinated by Margolin's career, though. Nor are archival photos, legal papers, and articles her only keys to Margolin's life. The connection between the two women has deep roots, stretching back to childhoods spent as wards of the same social services organization in New Orleans—albeit separated by nearly five decades.

Bessie Margolin was raised by the Jewish Orphans' Home of New Orleans. Born in 1909, Margolin was the second child of Russian-Jewish immigrants Harry and Rebecca Goldschmidt Margolin. When she was 4, her mother died, and she and her two siblings were placed in the orphanage. They grew up there together and attended what was then known as the Isidore Newman Manual Training School, which had been founded in 1903 to educate Jewish orphans and their peers.

After graduating from high school in 1925, Margolin attended Tulane University and Law School. She received both her bachelor's degree, with a major in political science and history, and her law degree in 1930.

Nearly 50 years after Margolin's birth, Trestman and her older brother, Bob, lived with their mother in the St. Thomas Housing Project, a New Orleans neighborhood on the northern bank of the Mississippi River. Their mother died in 1968, leaving them orphans at the ages of 11 and 14. They became wards of the Jewish Children's Regional Service, the successor to the Jewish Orphans' Home, which placed them in nearby foster homes. Trestman was raised by one of her mother's close friends and saw her brother often. From grades 7 through 12, she attended the Isidore Newman School.



Times Picayune

photo by Bryan Burris

“Miss Margolin ... was the most dignified and worldly woman

Upon Trestman's graduation from high school and acceptance to Goucher, her guidance counselor remembered that another, earlier graduate of the school also had moved north—and wrote a letter of introduction to Bessie Margolin on Trestman's behalf. When Trestman moved to Baltimore in the fall of 1974, the two women met for the first time.

Margolin invited Trestman to spend what would be the first of many weekends at her Arlington, Va., apartment. She took Trestman under her wing, and together they dined out and frequented the ballet and theater in the nation's capital. At their first meeting—dinner at a chic restaurant before an evening at the Kennedy Center—Trestman was particularly struck by Margolin's appearance. In a March 2011 presentation to the Jewish Children's Regional Service, she described her:

“Miss Margolin ... was the most dignified and worldly woman I had ever met. ... [That night, she] wore a well-tailored, fine wool suit and, if memory serves me correctly, a fur collar draped stylishly around her shoulders. Nothing

flashy, but I could tell she drafted and edited her outfit as strategically as an appellate legal brief. Indeed, at her temples white wisps in her black hair precisely punctuated her dark eyes and striking bone structure.”

Trestman, who lives with her husband in Pikesville, Md., and has two grown children, is trim and neat with penetrating eyes and short dark hair. She speaks with precision, weighing her words, choosing her phrasing carefully. Her study is filled with newspaper clippings, boxes of Margolin's personal papers, books on law and the Isidore Newman School, and biographies of figures like Albert Einstein and Cleopatra. Legal briefs that once belonged to Margolin, some containing notes in her looping hand, fill two boxes. Trestman, who from 1998 to 2011 served as a Goucher trustee and is a board member of Goucher Hillel, is working on what she hopes will be the first biography of Bessie Margolin. »



I had ever met.”

Times Picayune, April 8, 1939

New Orleans Item, April 6, 1939

The way in which Margolin presented herself—always feminine, always mysterious—is part of what interests Trestman. In an article published this year in the *Journal of Supreme Court History*, Trestman cites a 1939 feature that appeared in the *New Orleans Item*. In it, Margolin reluctantly answered a reporter’s questions about her personal life: “I haven’t had time for love.’ Then she smiled. ‘But I’m not immune, I’m just uncontaminated.’ Dr. Margolin brushed back a lock of soft black hair. ‘So far,’ she added.”

“She never married and she had no children, but she was beautiful,” says Trestman. “There was always this mystique about her.” The aura, she says, lent itself to Margolin’s fight for women’s equality in a male-dominated world of law. “She argued for women’s rights as a woman. She didn’t wear men’s suits or sensible shoes,” she says. In articles published in *Glamour* and *Time*, Margolin earned the reputation of the “quintessential lady lawyer.”

Integrity and self-reliance were traits that Margolin particularly valued. “She told me how important it was that women be financially independent,” Trestman says. Margolin also delivered tips on etiquette and business sense, all “with the kind of compelling certainty she used to argue a case.”

“During one of our early phone conversations, she made a comment about how she thought I had a very good speaking voice,” Trestman says. “I realized this wasn’t like ‘Aunt Mary’ being polite. She was not free with compliments. She didn’t speak without careful thought. I always believed that the comment was professionally linked. I understood her to be telling me that a clear, strong speaking voice was an important quality for a lawyer.”

Margolin graced the younger woman with gifts, as well. Once, when she was given a handmade scarf that didn’t suit her tastes, she offered it to Trestman with the original card that appropriately read “for the little girl from New Orleans.”

Trestman remained in touch with Margolin after graduating from Goucher and sought her advice on

her first brief-writing assignment at the George Washington University Law School. Within the seasoned lawyer’s cabinets were hundreds of bound Supreme Court briefs, a stack of which she lent to Trestman for the duration of her studies.

In 1982, a year after Trestman received her law degree, Margolin served as a character reference for Trestman’s admission to the Washington, DC, and Maryland bars and continued to advise her professionally. Years later, when Trestman was admitted to the Supreme Court to file briefs in a case, she hoped Margolin would be the lawyer of record to move her admission, but unfortunately Margolin’s health was in decline. She died in 1996 following a stroke.



photo by Bryan Burris

By the time of Margolin's death, Trestman had a successful career and a family. She often thought of her mentor—in 1993 she had made a presentation on her life to the Isidore Newman School—but it would be years before she considered writing a book about Margolin. Even then, she approached the project with trepidation.

"I had a biography in mind, but to tell the truth, my only thought was that someone else should do it. I didn't have the time or ability to do such a thing, and certainly not to do it well enough to do justice to Bessie," she says.

However, with the encouragement of friends and family and after receiving the Isidore Newman School's Distinguished Alumna Award for 2004-2005, Trestman began to conduct more intensive research.

"This really is a tribute to Bessie, to the Jewish Children's Regional Service, and to the Isidore Newman School because I was on the receiving end of so much benevolence," she says.

Despite the time they spent together, Trestman's memories of Margolin alone are not enough to fill out the complex story of her life. Margolin didn't leave behind any personal journals

or oral histories, which leaves Trestman gleaning details from legal papers written by Margolin and her colleagues to complete her biography.

She has traveled to archives throughout the country, including the National Archives in Washington, DC; the Tennessee Valley Authority oral history project in Memphis; the Jewish Children's Home at Tulane University; and the New Orleans Public Library. She also has flown to California to interview, among others, Malcolm and Toby Trifon, Margolin's nephews, and to Wisconsin to speak with Carin Clauss, another of Margolin's protégées and the U.S. Solicitor of Labor from 1977 to 1981.

This summer, Trestman took a sabbatical to continue her research. She recently was the recipient of a grant from the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and is one of three independent scholars to receive funding this year from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In April, Trestman's article, "Fair Labor: The Remarkable Life and Legal Career of Bessie Margolin (1909-1996)," was published in the *Journal of Supreme Court History*.

"Bessie and I talked about many things. But it would have been wonderful if I had thought to ask about even more, and to tape-record her every time we met or spoke," says Trestman.

Among the pieces of Margolin's story that Trestman finds most compelling—and most difficult to plumb—is her childhood. "What was it like to live in the orphanage?" Trestman wonders. "She lived there until she was 16. I might not ever know whether she was happy, how she felt when she was little. I'm trying to figure out how she became who she was." §

For more information about Trestman's research, visit www.marlenetrestman.com.



Margolin Papers

"I'm trying to figure out how she became who she was."