

An appreciation of Ann Hopkins, a glass ceiling pioneer

Article By:

Zuckerman Law Whistleblower Practice Group

Ann Hopkins recently passed away, nearly 30 years after her seminal Supreme Court case helped to shatter the [glass ceiling](#) at Price Waterhouse. Hopkins played a huge role in shaping how the courts, indeed the country, viewed women in the workplace, especially in terms of receiving promotions to high-level positions. And her case, [Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins](#), 490 U.S. 228 (1989), has been cited nearly 6,000 times in court opinions around the country.

By all accounts, Hopkins excelled at her job with Price Waterhouse and had a lucrative book of business. Yet the company denied her partnership bid twice, and of the 622 partners at the time, only 7 were women. The reasons given by Price Waterhouse for rejecting Hopkins included complaints from co-workers that she was foul-mouthed, aggressive, and demanding. One partner said that Hopkins needed to go to “charm school,” and she was encouraged to “walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear make-up, have her hair styled, and wear jewelry.” Basically, the company wanted Hopkins to behave in a more stereotypically-feminine manner and because she did not do so, it refused to make her a partner. Hopkins then resigned from the company and sued it for discrimination under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The Supreme Court’s decision in her case is significant for several reasons. Most notably, the Court recognized that discrimination based on sex stereotyping can be unlawful under Title VII. That is, a company can’t refuse to promote an individual simply because that person does not conform with traditional/stereotypical notions of how a woman should act/appear. More recently, courts around the country have applied this gender-stereotyping rationale to find that companies also may not discriminate on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Glass ceiling discrimination remains a stubborn obstacle across corporate America. But progress continues to be made in diversifying executive positions and Ann Hopkins deserves our profound appreciation for her role in making this happen.

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