



Barbara Scott Preiskel
1924 - 2002

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Barbara Scott Preiskel loved life. She loved family and friends, work and play. She enjoyed conversation, music, dancing, good wine, watching football, cooking, and entertaining.

And she was a trailblazer. The second black woman to graduate from Yale Law School, “Scottie,” as her friends called her, helped dissolve racial and gender barriers and pursued social justice through her work as a lawyer, providing leadership on corporate and nonprofit boards, and as an active volunteer. When she died of leukemia at age 77 on June 4, 2002, her many friends, colleagues, and admirers lost a radiant driving force and unerring social conscience.

Barbara Scott was born July 6, 1924, in Washington, D.C., the only child of a real estate entrepreneur and a chemistry teacher. She grew up in a segregated, upper middle-class culture and attended the prestigious local Dunbar High School. “Barbara’s high expectations for herself were nurtured by her parents. If she got an A, they prodded her, ‘why not an A+?’” said Robert H. Preiskel, her husband of 52 years.

Barbara with her mother.



Barbara as a student at
Wellesley College.



The two met in 1946 at Yale Law School, when she was 21 and he 24 and just out of the Army. She had graduated from Wellesley College with a BA in June of 1945. “Her date had stood her up, so a mutual friend enlisted me to escort her to a dance,” recalls Preiskel. “I had 75 cents in my pocket, so when the others had dinner, we had coffee. At the party, she disappeared to dance with everyone else. Finally, when my turn came, she decided I was a sexy dancer.”

He was immediately captivated by her beauty and joyous, affirmative love of life. “I knew early on that I’d be happy to be with her forever. Barbara always said yes to life.”

Their parents warned them that they were buying a lot of trouble with an interracial marriage, but his family’s concern disappeared as soon as they met Barbara. Bob attests, “Afterward, they much preferred Barbara to me.”

Her career began with a clerkship for the prestigious Judge Charles Wyzanski of the U.S. District Court in Boston. Then, after an eight-month association with the law firm Poletti, Diamon, Roosevelt, Freidin, Mackay & Associates, Barbara joined Dwight, Royal,



Barbara as a young lawyer.

Harris, Keogh & Casey. She was an associate at that firm for four years.

Barbara took great satisfaction in assisting and mentoring young people. “She was an excellent role model for those good enough to go into the major firms,” said the Honorable Constance Baker Motley, senior judge of the U.S. Southern District Court of New York who first met Barbara in Thurgood Marshall’s NAACP office in 1946. “In those days there were not many women lawyers around, so we all recognized a special bond to each other.”

In 1954, when her son John was born, Barbara began freelancing, first at the Ford Foundation and then back at Dwight, Royal, where she remained until 1959. By then her second son, Richard, had arrived and she became a full-time mother.

As the two boys grew up, she returned to work. John remembers impressing school friends by bringing them to his mom’s classy Fifth Avenue office at the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), where Barbara spent most of her career. She had joined the Association in 1959, serving as deputy at-

torney until 1971, then as legal counsel and vice president. In 1977, she became senior vice president and general counsel where she remained until 1983.

The late MPAA chief Jack Valenti claimed he had “no dearer loyal friend, no more capable colleague, no finer lawyer in whom to repose my trust than Barbara Scott. I still remember the day she informed me she was resigning to spend more time on corporate and nonprofit boards. I was desolate but understood: If I were seeking a board member, she’d be the highest on the list. When we had difficult moments in Southern legislatures over the content of our movies, I’d ask Barbara to fly to whatever capitol and testify. Invariably, she’d charm their socks off and if there was venom in the air before, she quickly filled the room with her sweet and elegant personality and flawless logic. The air turned fresh. The Southern legislators fell all over themselves congratulating her. They just melted.”

Barbara then began serving on dozens of corporate boards (including those of General Electric, R. H. Macy, and The Washington Post Company). But her true love was her involvement in charitable, educational, cultural, and civic organizations. Her lifelong devotion to charity began in 1958 when she joined the board of the Wiltwyck School for Boys, a board she soon chaired. For a dozen years, she served as a trustee of the American Museum of the Moving Image, a successor trustee of Yale University, and on the boards of the American Women’s Economic Development Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The list of institutions that benefited from her stewardship is amazing and illustrates

the broad scope of her interests. It includes The New York Philharmonic, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, the Bar Association of the City of New York, the Board of Ethics of the City of New York, and The BOLD Initiative.

Her service to academic institutions included Hunter College's School of Social Work, New York University's Program on Philanthropy and the Law, Wellesley College, and Tougaloo College in Mississippi, which her mother attended.

At Wellesley, "we relied on her for sensitive insight and wise counsel," notes former Wellesley College President Diana Chapman

Walsh. "We always knew that even a brief check-in with her could be counted on to clear the fog. It was she to whom the board turned, for example, as it became clear that we needed to revise many of our customary practices. With a blend of patience and persistence, she found the middle ground between innovation and tradition and forged a consensus that had eluded us before."

Barbara accepting one of the numerous awards given to her.



“She grabbed life with both hands and always had a positive attitude that she could move things forward. She wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

— Lulu Wang

In the 1980s, Barbara went to a South African prison with Lyn Walker Huntley, president of the Southern Education Foundation. “From the warden we demanded information about the whereabouts of an anti-apartheid activist,” Huntley recalls. “Barbara was unconcerned about her personal safety and determined to do what she could to let authorities know that someone cared about the man in question. We had been told that this was an important way of helping to protect those in detention from being ‘disappeared.’”

Beatrice Fitzpatrick, who worked with Barbara for over two decades as head of Business Opportunities for Leadership Diversity said, “She did more than open doors. She walked us through them. She operated at the highest level of society to effect changes at the lowest levels. She used her income from the corporate boards to support the nonprofits she believed in.”

In October 1978, she joined the Distribution Committee of The New York Community Trust and served as its board chairman from 1990 to 1995. “Her enthusiasm never flagged and her sophistication about our needs never stopped growing,” noted Lorie Slutsky, president of The Trust. “She understood the issues consistently, asked the right

questions, helped us to clarify our goals and the approaches we took to meet them. Her work for The Trust had a wonderful constancy, purity, and intensity—and helped improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers, and for many beyond New York,” says Slutsky. “She loved this complex city and she loved the multi-faceted work of The Trust.”

She made things look easy. Anne P. Sidamon-Eristoff, former chairman of The New York Community Trust, notes that Barbara “moved us in the directions she wished with intelligence, warmth, and tact—and without apparent effort. No one ever ran a better meeting. And on top of that she had an elegance and sense of humor that made her sparkle and somehow, by reflection, made everyone around her sparkle too.”

“Barbara was incredibly alive and spirited,” says Lulu Wang, who served with her on several boards, including Wellesley’s and The Trust’s. “But rather than being one dimensional, she had a wonderful spectrum of engagement. She grabbed life with both hands and always had a positive attitude that she could move things forward. She wouldn’t take no for an answer. She believed that if you play by the rules it should work out, and for the most part it did with Barbara. She won people over.”

Barbara loved ballroom dancing, good wine, and any variety of poker. At NAACP Legal Defense Fund meetings, she would gamble the night away with the guys. She loved to have her homes look beautiful, but was an indifferent gardener at her East Hampton, Long Island retreat. “All the vegetables seemed to ripen when we were in the city,” says Bob Preiskel. Brought up a Depression baby with a waste-not, want-not mind set, she re-used tin foil



Barbara at the beach with her two sons, John and Richard.

and gift-wrap but generously gave her money away. She'd fall asleep at her 58th Street Manhattan apartment soon after the TV news began, and when confronted, grumble that she'd really been awake. Barbara loved to go, go, go.

As a compromise with her more laid-back, stay-at-home mate, every Sunday evening in the summer for more than twenty years they would meet friends on the beach in East Hampton for songs and a picnic of leftovers.

She was a hopeless athlete. She treasured her favorite 3-wood, but never inched her golf handicap below 40. When the family skied, she stayed indoors, turning up for lunch at the lodge looking rested and glamorous.

Her mirthful spirit continued even when she was sick. When Diane Kinch Corry, Clerk of the Board of Trustees at Wellesley College, telephoned her in the hospital to discuss the outline for the next meeting of the Governance Committee, Barbara said she had some comments on the plans. "I could hear papers being shuffled and then she exclaimed, 'My



Barbara with her husband, Bob, on vacation.

office is so disorganized.’ There was a pause, followed by her wonderful deep chuckle, and she said: ‘I can’t believe I just called this my office!’”

She loved traveling. A year before she became ill, the Preiskels and friends chartered a sailboat to the Greek Isles. After a five-week hospital stay and a supposedly miraculous recovery, they traveled for two months in Florida and the Caribbean before a relapse returned her to the hospital.

“Her hospital room was like a salon,” says Rebecca Weiss, a friend from their college days, “with discussions of world events, everyone’s travels, and society gossip, the latest restaurants, and e-mail jokes. Regal Scottie, with Bob’s help and no matter what the state of her health on a particular day, presided with humor, courage, optimism, and tenacity for life that was awesome.

While undergoing treatments, Barbara was advised by her doctors that she had a 20

percent chance of beating the disease. “Well, I’ve always been in the upper 20 percent, so I’m confident I’ll make it,” she responded. She never knew that she wouldn’t. She contracted pneumonia and died within 24 hours.

“She never felt sorry for herself,” said her husband. But she did feel sorry for others, and was determined to help them. That’s why she joined the New York City Partnership and Citizens Committee for Children and chaired the Wiltwyck School board. It’s why she became involved with the American Civil Liberties Union, the health care needs of South African blacks, and so many other causes.

The Barbara S. Preiskel Memorial Fund was set up in The Trust to continue to support the many issues that concerned her.

Barbara battling leukemia with eternal optimism.



The New York Community Trust

is a community foundation, helping New Yorkers achieve their charitable goals and making grants that respond to the needs of our City.

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