

Safe Berks Founding Mother

The Honorable Linda K.M. Ludgate

From as far back as she can remember, the Honorable Linda K.M. Ludgate, 75, has been fighting for the rights of anyone who has been abused or treated unfairly.

The youngest of 14 children, her mother became very ill when she was a toddler.

“Because my mom was sick, my dad raised me,” said Ludgate. “My dad always told me, I could be anything I wanted to be. My dad died when I was 10. I was sent to live with people who were paid to take care of me, and that is never a good thing.”

Strong-willed and resilient, she utilized the challenges of her childhood to fuel her passion for helping others.

When Ludgate was a freshman in high school in southern Indiana, public schools were integrated. “That was a very telling moment in my life,” she said. “Teachers called students racial slurs right in front of everyone. I stood up for the African American students. I sat with them at lunch. I stood in the way of the bullies. I will never know what it is like to be discriminated against for the color of my skin, but at least I have empathy. I have always had empathy. I have always identified with the underdog, ever since I was a kid.”

Ludgate moved to Reading in 1974. She and her husband, Bob, were raising their four children when she decided to go back to school to become a lawyer.

She was inspired by one of her brothers, William Mowson, who was accepted to study law at Cornell Law School but decided to enlist in the Army to fight in World War II. Tragically, William was killed in 1945 in the Battle of the Bulge. “My brother wanted to become a lawyer and that’s why I became one,” said Ludgate.

However, she faced harsh sexism as she tried to enroll in college in 1974, as a 32-year-old mother of four.

As the keynote speaker at a recent Women2Women luncheon hosted by the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, she told the crowd of mainly professional women what she heard from local colleges in 1974.

“I was told, ‘You have a husband to support you, go home,’ and ‘Go take care of your kids lady,’ and also, ‘There’s no money for old people,’ ” she recalled. “At 32, I was old, think about that!”

Ludgate persisted. She met with the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters of Alvernia University and they welcomed her and asked how they could help. She earned a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and social work, and then continued her education at Temple University’s Beasley School of Law. She lived in an apartment in Philadelphia during the week and came home on the weekends.

In 1976, while she was a college student and raising four children, Ludgate was also working to help victims of domestic violence. She was one of 12 dedicated women who met at the YWCA in Reading to begin the monumental task of providing services to survivors. They met to discuss the details of providing hotline, counseling, and temporary housing services to victims.

While they were meeting and planning, Ludgate and others offered survivors safe haven in their own homes, inviting them to sleep on their couches and on the floor in their living rooms. “It just happened,” said Ludgate, when asked why. “They had nowhere else to go, and they had just been through a terrible ordeal.”

She did not know then, that one of those survivors would be there to help her in the future.

These 12 women – known as the Founding Mothers of Safe Berks - were pioneers locally and statewide, as they sought to find solutions to end family violence and to help all victims. They attended the first meeting of the Pennsylvania Coalition against Domestic Violence held on Nov. 12, 1976, in Lancaster, and became one of the Coalition’s first members. They worked tirelessly, putting together the framework to make families safe, piece by piece. They pooled their resources and resolutely pursued the support of the greater Reading community. They did not give up and the community responded.

In 1976, they founded Berks Women in Crisis (BWIC). In 2006, Ludgate and the other Founding Mothers received the *Voices for Change* Award, which honors individuals who further the mission of eliminating domestic violence and sexual assault in Berks County. In 2016, Berks Women in Crisis was renamed Safe Berks, at the celebration of its 40th anniversary.

Ludgate’s dream to become a judge was born during her first year in law school. After earning her law degree, she served as a public defender in Philadelphia.

Next, she worked as a lawyer for Central Pennsylvania Legal Services, fighting for the rights of low-income clients.

Ludgate served as a Berks County Common Pleas judge from 1989 to 2012, when she reached the mandatory retirement age of 70. She also lectured at Albright College, Alvernia University, Kutztown University and Reading Area Community College, and often visited schools to share information about the rewards and opportunities offered by careers in the field of law.

For several years, Ludgate was an educator at the Victims Assistance Academy at the University of Scranton. She has attended international academy educational programs in London, Oxford, Paris and Strasbourg. She was also appointed as a member of the International Judicial Academy Board of Directors.

For the past five years, she has served as a senior judge, traveling across the state to preside over court hearings. She recently had to take a medical leave due to a broken femur, but hopes to soon begin working again.

In addition to helping to found Safe Berks, Ludgate was also a driving force in creating many other organizations and innovations in Berks County, including:

- The Berks County Prison Society.
- The Berks Women's Network.
- The "Saturday Morning in Court" sessions to train young lawyers on court procedures.
- The "Meet Your Judges" program to provide a forum for dialogue between judges and the public.
- The Justice William Strong Chapter of the American Inns of Court, which provides networking opportunities among young lawyers, experienced lawyers and judges.

In addition to the *Voices for Change* Award, Ludgate has been honored with awards too numerous to list, but here are a few:

- The Justice William Strong Award, from the Berks County Bar Association.
- The Linda K.M. Ludgate Award for Outstanding Criminal Justice Advisory Boards (CJAB) Leadership, from the PA Commission on Crime & Delinquency (PCCD)
- The Alpern Award, presented annually by the PA Bar Association to a female lawyer or judge who demonstrates excellence in the legal profession and who makes a significant professional impact on women in the law.

- Alvernia University awards including the Trustee Emerita Award, the Ellen Frei Gruber Alumni Service Award for outstanding service to the college and community, and the Distinguished Alumni Award from the Criminal Justice Alumni.
- The Berks County Woman of Distinction Award from the Girl Scouts Great Valley Council.
- The W. Richard Eshelman Award from the Berks County Prison Society.
- The President's Award from the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges.

But of all these accomplishments and awards, the mark of distinction which touched her most came from a survivor of domestic violence, delivered to her during her darkest hour.

On Oct. 19, 1999, Ludgate was brutally attacked in her courtroom by a defendant, suffering breaks to her forearm, nose, and an orbital bone. Her face was so intensely beaten that her vision was impaired when she arrived at the emergency room.

However, she heard a nurse say that she would not leave her side until she knew she was safe and stable.

As Ludgate told the story to the crowd at the Women2Women luncheon, the room was silent.

"I thought, 'Boy, that's nice,' " Ludgate said. "And then she whispered to me, 'I slept on your living room floor.' "

The crowd of women seemed to take in a collective breath. And then there were tears.

"I will carry that in my heart forever," said Ludgate. "I can hardly tell the story without wanting to cry.