

Barbara Patton

New York State Assemblywoman and Law Professor

Thirty -six years of Barbara Patton’s life can be compared to 15 seconds on a rollercoaster. Getting on a ride, one anticipates excitement and safe landing and looks forward to unexpected turns and fears with no way back.

Similar to this, beginning her journey as a housewife and then a single mother, Patton became the first African American woman who was elected in the suburban community, to only later become a lawyer before retiring as a consultant for *Bell Atlantic Company*, which is now *Verizon Communications*. Her breathtaking career is an encouraging example for people who want to become successful, but just do not know where to begin.

For Patton, it all started at Kingsborough.

“I would not trade my experience for anything else,” she said. “I am so glad that I was at Kingsborough. It helped me to evolve, to be the person I am now. If I had the opportunity to change my life journey, though, I would probably go to school a little earlier.”

Having enrolled at Kingsborough when she was 30 years old, Patton was not an ordinary college student. Taking classes was not the only thing she concentrated on. There was housework, a husband and two kids to worry about, but Patton decided that education was also important.

“It was 1974. By that time, I had worked for a little bit, but mostly I was at home with my kids,” she recalled. “When my children went to school for the whole day, I thought that since I had never gone to college after high school, I could do it then instead of going to work. In those days, the tuition was free, so it wasn’t going to be an extra cost. I had my classes during the same hours my kids were at school. My aunt was the director of admissions at Baruch College and she recommended me to start at a community college, as I was out of school for 14 years.”

The daughter of civil servants, her father worked for the New York City Transit Authority and mother for the Social Security Administration, Patton decided that she wanted an occupation in private sector. Therefore, she chose Business Administration as her major at Kingsborough.

“Even though I eventually went to work for the government, I had no intention of becoming a civil servant or running for office. My plan was to work for a corporation. At one point I even thought that I would work on New York Stock Exchange,” Patton remembered.

It was at Kingsborough that she decided that she would go to Law School one day.

“It was my first semester when I took a course in Business Law and I loved it,” said Patton. “Prior to that, I never thought of a career in Law. This was one of the things Kingsborough gave me: a focus, an opportunity I may never had in another school.”

This Business Law Program Patton was so passionate about was started by Professor Abraham Litke. He would organize mock trials during his classes. Litke would invent a case and assign students to be plaintiffs, defendants and witnesses; he was always the judge. Therefore, students were given an opportunity to use their public speaking skills to support their position.

Litke was a lawyer, and he often granted his prospective students with the chance to gain some experience.

“He would offer us to work in his office or go to court with him,” recalled Patton. “This was all in our spare time, but it helped me to understand what the law was all about.”

Studying Business Law, Patton also volunteered to sit on Public Speaking classes. Listening to other students getting their points across the room, she was training herself for her future law career and then applied her skills at the mock trials.

Having graduated from Kingsborough with the 3.8 GPA, Patton received a scholarship to Hofstra University in Long Island. The choice of the English major was not accidental. Patton decided that strengthening her command of the language and reading would be an excellent way to prepare for Law School.

Being tempted by staying at Hofstra as an English professor, Patton chose to follow her dream and proceeded to Hofstra University Law School. At the same time, she was accepted to NYU Law School, but she had to reject the opportunity.

“At that time, my kids were still at high school and studying at Hofstra University was still close to home,” Patton explained. “Turning NYU down wasn’t an easy choice, but I did not think I could be away from my children, still young teenagers at that time. I regretted it initially. To be honest, I think that God works mysteriously around us because, as I found out later, my seat at NYU was taken by a good friend of mine, also an older student with three kids, who lived around the corner from me. I was divorced at that point and she was still married. Her husband could take care of their children and she could commute to NYU every day. I would say it did work out very well for both of us.”

Only eight years after she entered Kingsborough, in 1982, Patton was elected to the New York State Assembly. Having served in the position for six years, she then worked as a commissioner and chair of the New York State Workers Compensation Board and the democratic commissioner for the County Board of Election.

“Being the Assembly woman from the 18th Assembly District was one of the most memorable moments in my political career,” said Patton. “I had an opportunity to focus on some of the issues that were important to me. First, I managed to get a lot of funding

for schools in my district. And secondly, there also were no special health services for women returning from combat like mammography. I got a lot of laws changed and provided a lot of bettering services during my office when I became a chair woman of Committee for Women Benefits in 1984.”

Later on, Patton managed to work for a private corporation as well. She became a vice-president for government affairs for *Nynex*, a phone company that merged with *Bell Atlantic* Company.

“I was one of the people who helped the merging. Two other vice-presidents and I had the job done in 18 months through communicating with Albany and Washington,” she said.

Having worked in different spheres, Patton admitted that she used a lot of her talents. For instance, her outstanding public speaking skills were a necessity at every job she had. The fact that she had a Law Degree was important as well.

Patton pointed out, “Working for a law firm was not the only sphere I used my degree in. I used it in many different ways, not only practicing law. With a Law Degree, one can become a lawmaker and change the world.”

Retired for the third time and looking forward to the future, Patton is planning to work with a group of lawyers who volunteer to protect children’s rights at the court.

“There are a lot of kids in the United States who experience abuse and injustice. Parents have lawyers, agencies have lawyers, but children have only social workers to stand for them. Becoming a legal guardian for children together with other lawyers, this is what will be my next challenge,” said Patton with anticipation.

**Interview completed by Kingsborough Student, Ekaterina Lalo
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