

## INVOLVED IN LIFE:

# Christine Bremer Muggli on a Northwoods Practice

**Christine Bremer Muggli envisioned a legal career in service to the community. Her personal injury practice in Wausau and her service on community boards, statewide committees, and teaching affiliations have allowed just that – service to the community.**

BY SHANNON GREEN

As a young lawyer on her first day at a small firm in Merrill, Christine Bremer Muggli discovered that she was a little afraid of going through the front door.

It was 1982, when very few women practiced law in northern Wisconsin – but that wasn't the issue.

"It was the ducks," she said.

Bremer Muggli was a "Chicago girl." In the early years of her legal career, she worked in a 150-person law firm in Chicago with a view of Lake Michigan (and no ducks in sight). "Then I married a guy from Wausau, and we decided to move up north," she said.

Her new position at "a tiny law firm" presented a challenge for her at the front door. "I didn't know if the ducks would move for me or what they would do," she said.

In Merrill, she started a personal injury practice with only a desk and a box of files. From there with a lot of effort and hard work, her practice grew, and she purchased it in 1989. Her practice – with her first husband – grew until they divorced in 2003, when she again started over, now with her own solo firm. "At age 50, I started over. That was tricky and hard work."

But she was never alone.

## Chicago, Loyola, and Wausau

She is still with the law firm she began at age 50, and it's going strong. Bremer Muggli is chief shareholder of Bremer & Trollop Law Offices S.C., Wausau. At age 71, she continues her practice in personal injury law.

She always knew she wanted to be a lawyer. She grew up with a large family in the Jesuit Catholic tradition. "There were a lot of lawyers

in my background," she said. Her grandfather, James R. Quinn, had been an alderman and lawyer in Chicago. Bremer Muggli was brought up on stories of him bringing food to neighbors who were starving during the Great Depression and decided that to be a lawyer was to have a career in service to the community.

She worked hard through high school and college "because I knew how hard it was to



get into law school.” When she told her grandfather that she wanted to follow in his footsteps, he told her no – “you’re too nice.” But her arguments and a very high GPA won him over.

Bremer Muggli attended Loyola University Chicago for both college and law school, wanting to go into public service. Her first job after law school was as a special assistant attorney general in Illinois, a position that gave her opportunities to work on cases before the U.S. Supreme Court and to argue a case before the Illinois Supreme Court on the rights of people confined in institutions for both mental health and developmental disabilities.

When she moved to Wausau, she had difficulty finding a job despite gaining experience in Chicago, “because in 1982, it was evident they had no desire to hire a woman.” Frustrated, she turned to the phone book and found the name of one woman who was practicing law in the Wausau area: Ann Walsh Bradley (now a Wisconsin Supreme Court justice). “I called her out of the blue. She didn’t know me at all. But she was wonderful to me on the phone.” Walsh Bradley gave Bremer Muggli the name of one lawyer to try – a criminal defense lawyer in Merrill. “I called him, flew up north, and after a 20-minute interview, he hired me,” she said.

### A Career of Service

That phone call began a lifelong friendship with Justice Ann Walsh Bradley, a relationship that they both cherish today and that has enhanced their lives. In fact, they are now literally family – Bremer Muggli’s daughter married Justice Bradley’s son, and the couple have three children, making Bremer Muggli and Justice Bradley grandparents of grandchildren they share.

“We still talk all the time,” she said of Justice Bradley. “She inspired me to get involved in the community,” Bremer Muggli said. Little by little over the years, Bremer Muggli built a strong involvement in Wausau, first by serving on her children’s parent-teacher organization and later as a member and then president

of the board of education of the Wausau School District. She was also president of a local performing arts association board that created that city’s ArtsBlock. “Being involved in the creation of the ArtsBlock was extremely rewarding, as it had a huge impact on the city of Wausau.”

As a litigator – one of the few women litigators in northern Wisconsin – she joined the Wisconsin Association for Justice (WAJ, formerly the Wisconsin Academy of Trial Lawyers, at wisjustice.org), eventually becoming its second woman president in 2008: “I was rewarded with many lifelong friends who are also my colleagues through the Wisconsin Association for Justice, doing important work,” she said.

During her presidency year, Bremer Muggli co-founded the organization’s Women’s Caucus. “I didn’t really have any women friends who were trial lawyers at the time,” and the group brought them together for networking and mutual support. “It was a way for us to find each other.” The group is very active today, committed to helping young women lawyers to “make certain we’re building the practice for women,” she said.

The WAJ is a professional organization dedicated to serving its members. It works with the judiciary, the Wisconsin Legislature, and members of the legal profession to offer better support for clients. In addition, the Women’s Caucus works to help law firms understand they must support lawyers who want to be parents and still maintain their careers. The efforts to strengthen parental and family leave policies are important. “The Women’s Caucus also works hard to make certain the judiciary understands that trial lawyers also need time off to raise families,” Bremer Muggli said. “Parental leave is something that not everyone thinks about, but women must think about.”

In 2007, Bremer Muggli and former U.S. Rep. David Obey founded the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS, at wipps.org). The institute’s goals include promoting citizen-centered democracy by educating

and engaging Wisconsin residents and developing future leaders. “Obey was a strong leader in Congress as chair of the Appropriations Committee. It was important to preserve his work and continue his legacy, by bringing in speakers and leaders and making certain we encourage youth to join in leadership in government and outside,” she said.

Obey “is a dear friend of mine,” she said. In addition to WIPPS, Bremer Muggli participated in another “huge undertaking,” bringing Obey’s papers – 100 donated boxes of papers and other materials – to the Wisconsin Historical Society in Stevens Point. “These papers continue to be a great source for community dialogue on all topics.”

### Shaping Wisconsin’s Judiciary

Bremer Muggli was a member of the Democratic National Committee through 2016 and was appointed to the Wisconsin Electoral College in 2008 and 2012 when Barack Obama was elected president. She serves on many statewide boards promoting the advancement of democratic ideals, including Law Forward. Bremer Muggli is involved in the Legacy Project of the Wisconsin Historical Society, working to preserve the legacy of the late Shirley Abrahamson, who was Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court for many years. “She is someone we can recall with great pride who served Wisconsin as the first woman supreme court justice. Preserving Justice Abrahamson’s legacy is especially crucial in these times when the judiciary is under a great deal of criticism and attack,” Bremer Muggli said.

She is a member of Gov. Tony Evers’ Judicial Selection Advisory Committee and formerly served as co-chair. The committee’s goal is to interview lawyers from across the state to select candidates for judicial vacancies – helping the governor choose a candidate who represents the region in question. The committee members ensure that judges reflect the diversity of their communities, show legal scholarship, and are skilled in

## WOMEN TO WATCH

## Hon. Ashley J. Morse: Using the Law as a Force for Change

**Ashley Morse is the first person of color and only the second woman to serve as a Rock County Circuit Court judge. As a child, knowing the courts could correct injustices meant everything to her. That idea planted a seed that grew into a calling to inspire others to imagine new possibilities for themselves.**

### What shaped your decision to become a lawyer?

*Brown v. Board of Education* had a profound impact on me. I met my first best friend, a white girl, in the fourth grade in public school. I could not fathom a world that dictates who my friends are based on race.

*Loving v. Virginia* also hit close to home. I am biracial, and the idea that my parents could have faced imprisonment simply for loving each other is unthinkable.

These cases made it clear that the law at times had not always aligned with what I knew to be true and just. There was something powerful – knowing that the courts could correct injustices.

Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP's work inspired me to use the law as a force for change. If not for those decisions and the lawyers who fought for them, my life today would look vastly different.

Growing up, I didn't know any lawyers, nor did I know anyone who had attended college. These cases opened my eyes to a world where people who looked like me were doing extraordinary things. These cases inspired me to become a lawyer, a public defender, and a judge.

### Did you see yourself as a judge when you graduated from law school in 2009?

My goal was simply to help people, including my family.

My father struggled with a life-long addiction, and he spent much of his time in and out of incarceration. I don't know how he was treated by the courts. I learned of his death shortly after I began my career as a state public defender in 2010.

I didn't initially see myself as a judge. That changed when I met the Hon. Molly GaleWyrick of Polk County. When I entered her courtroom, it felt alive – it was personal and human. She genuinely cared about the people standing in front of her. That experience stayed with me, and I started to think, "Maybe I could do that, too."

### What career accomplishment makes you most proud?

I am incredibly proud of my 12 years as a public defender. It is constitutionally mandated work that often goes unappreciated, and it can be very emotionally exhausting. But occasionally, I am reminded why this work is so vital to the people we serve. Special moments make it all worthwhile.

### As the first person of color to serve as a Rock County Circuit Court judge, what does this distinction mean to you?

It is an incredible honor. Women of color come into my



courtroom to tell me they "just had to see it with their own eyes." For them, seeing someone who looked like them on the bench made a piece of a dream feel real.

Representation matters. It reinforces the idea that spaces like this – positions of authority, influence, and decision-making – are for everyone. Knowing that my presence on the bench can inspire others to imagine new possibilities for themselves makes this role even more special. It's a reminder of how important it is to continue creating opportunities for those who will follow.

### What would you say to Wisconsin's first woman lawyer if you met her today?

I would say to Lavinia Goodell, "Thank you." Thank you for believing in yourself and for having the audacity to claim your space at a time when women weren't welcome in the profession.

I would also love to meet civil rights activist and legal scholar Pauli Murray. This passage written about her resonates deeply with me: "Whatever the world and country thought of her, Murray knew herself capable of doing the work." I imagine Goodell carried the same spirit.

Murray had an unshakeable sense of worth and ability. She wrote a letter to President Nixon suggesting herself for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. That audacity delights me.

Women like Murray and Goodell remind us that we belong in every space where decisions are made, even when the world isn't ready to welcome us. **WL**

**Joyce Hastings** and **Mary E. Burke** coordinated this series of women history makers and women to watch in celebration in 2024 of the 150th anniversary of the first woman admitted to practice law. They hope these stories encourage the full integration of women into the profession and create awareness of the path Lavinia Goodell and other women have paved for today's lawyers.

practice areas to serve the people. It is important that “judicial candidates include various areas of practice such as prosecutors, public defenders, civil trial lawyers, and business lawyers.”

With the work of the committee, Governor Evers’ appointments have “helped change the face of Wisconsin’s judiciary to be more diverse while continuing the tradition of legal excellence with people who care about their communities,” Bremer Muggli said.

As a member of the Wisconsin Federal Nominating Commission, Bremer Muggli was part of a team that helped Senator Tammy Baldwin select Green Bay attorney Byron B. Conway as a federal judge for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin – an appointment that was confirmed in September 2024. “It was crucial to fill this vacancy after many years without a successful nomination,” Bremer Muggli said.

### The Most Important Work

“My goal in the law was always as a service business,” Bremer Muggli said.

Amid all her achievements, it is her personal injury practice that she considers her most important work – other than raising two daughters: Rachel Bradley, now a lawyer in Spring Green, and Hannah

Heil, a litigation paralegal in her mother’s firm. Bremer Muggli’s family expanded when she remarried and gained three stepchildren in the process, whom she describes as “wonderful professionals.”

“The most important work I’ve done is to represent the people of northern Wisconsin who have been injured in some way,” Bremer Muggli said. “I get to know them and their families – these incredible people from northern Wisconsin who have unfortunately been through a tragedy.” Her clients often hesitate to hire a lawyer, saying that they do not wish to sue anyone. “I am honored to represent the people of Wisconsin.”

### Advice to Young Women Lawyers

It heartens Bremer Muggli to see that women now comprise more than 50% of law school students. In 1975, her law school class at Loyola was more than 50% women – remarkable at that time – but she was dismayed to learn later that the vast majority did not practice law for very long. Bremer Muggli was determined to not have that happen to her. “We have to learn that you do not have to quit your legal career in order to start a family. We need to build support for young parents to continue in their service to their communities,” she said.

In the years after her divorce when she started her own solo firm, it was “really challenging.” “Banks didn’t want to give me loans, and I was advised that most businesses fail in the first two years. I worked so hard to make certain that didn’t happen,” Bremer Muggli said. “I’d sleep under my desk at night. I just wouldn’t give up – because you can’t. I wanted to do this work all my life, so I wasn’t going to give up.”

The lesson she wants to tell young women lawyers: “That you can do it, that you can be on your own. You don’t need to be in a firm that doesn’t appreciate you.”

With her daughter, Rachel, who now owns her own practice, Bremer Muggli once a year returns to Loyola Law School to teach a class on tort law – and offer lessons to the law students about their future practices. “We advise them this: You should center your career in an area of law that deeply interests you. If you do what you love, you will be successful.”

Another piece of advice to law students: “Be judicious about the student loans you take, you do not want to be tied down in a career that does not fulfill you simply because you have to make your loan payments,” she said.

As an injury law attorney, “There is nothing better than representing people whose lives you can change with your hard work. It’s a great career – it’s hard and intense, and emotionally draining. Sometimes you feel like you are working 24 hours a day, but in the end, it’s extremely rewarding,” she said.

One more tip: “It’s important to stay involved in life. Don’t let the lights go out in your heart before you leave this earth.” **WL**



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**Shannon Green** is communications writer for the State Bar of Wisconsin, Madison. Access the digital article at [www.wisbar.org/wl](http://www.wisbar.org/wl).  
[sgreen@wisbar.org](mailto:sgreen@wisbar.org)