

CREATIVE WORKS



WITNESS TO HISTORY: Penny Cooper '64

FILM: PENNY COOPER '64

Time for a Close-Up: A Legal Life on Film

Imagine walking into a theater filled with 200 friends and associates to watch a half-hour documentary about your life—and not knowing what you'll see.

That's what happened to Penny Cooper '64 during the fall premiere of "PENNY" at Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive. Although she sat for numerous interviews, Cooper was not involved in the editing process and chose not to preview the documentary by Bay Area filmmaker Elizabeth Sher.

"It was pretty overwhelming and emotional," Cooper says. "It's almost like looking at your own funeral or obituary."

Shown at Berkeley Law in November, "PENNY" chronicles Cooper's career as a renowned trial lawyer and also her life, which has dovetailed with tremendous social change. In the film, Cooper describes the anti-Semitism she encountered growing up in Denver in the 1940s and '50s, and the discrimination she felt as one of just 11 women in Berkeley Law's 1964 graduating class.

While thrilled to join the Alameda County Public Defender's Office after graduating, Cooper soon experienced retaliation for opposing the Vietnam War. So in 1969, she and a colleague opened their own practice—gaining

about 100 clients by offering reduced fees to demonstrators charged during that year's People's Park protests. "I really wanted to be a trial lawyer," Cooper says in the film. "I wanted to fight for the people."

In 1982, Cooper teamed with Cris Arguedas to build a powerhouse criminal defense firm. They became the first female defense lawyers to try a major white-collar crime case, and obtained acquittals and reduced sentences in several high-profile verdicts. In 1987, they prevailed in a U.S. Supreme Court decision regarding an unlawful probation search.

On the first day courthouses opened for same-sex marriages in California in 2008, Cooper married longtime partner Rena Rosenwasser. Together, they have amassed one of the United States' largest private collections of contemporary art by women.

In 2010, nine years after retiring, Cooper was inducted into the State Bar of California's Trial Lawyer Hall of Fame.

While at ease under the courtroom lights, she found on-camera sessions difficult. "Every time Sher would leave after an interview, I'd think of 20 things I should have said," Cooper recalls. "I was just really happy I survived and didn't say anything terrible. I'm kind of loose-lipped."

—Wendy Witherspoon

PENNY

By Elizabeth Sher

www.pennythedocumentary.com