

Retire? Not Mary Jane Tucker

Now 85, law firm receptionist began working at age 17

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Mary Jane Tucker has been reinventing herself as a career woman since 1955.

For 37 years as the receptionist at L'Abbate, Balkan, Colavita & Contini LLP, she has been the first face that co-workers and clients see when they walk through the law firm's Melville doors. Tucker's co-workers said she has such a strong work ethic that, according to managing partner Marian Rice, "She had to be pried from her desk during the mandatory pandemic shutdown and was one of the first back when offices reopened."

In an age of quiet quitting and job hopping, Tucker, 85, has managed not only to endure, she's also adapted to technological changes from multiline push-button phones to Chromebooks. The firm has stuck by her as well, with Rice praising Tucker as a tireless worker who "has been the single constant for the firm" since 1986.

Early career

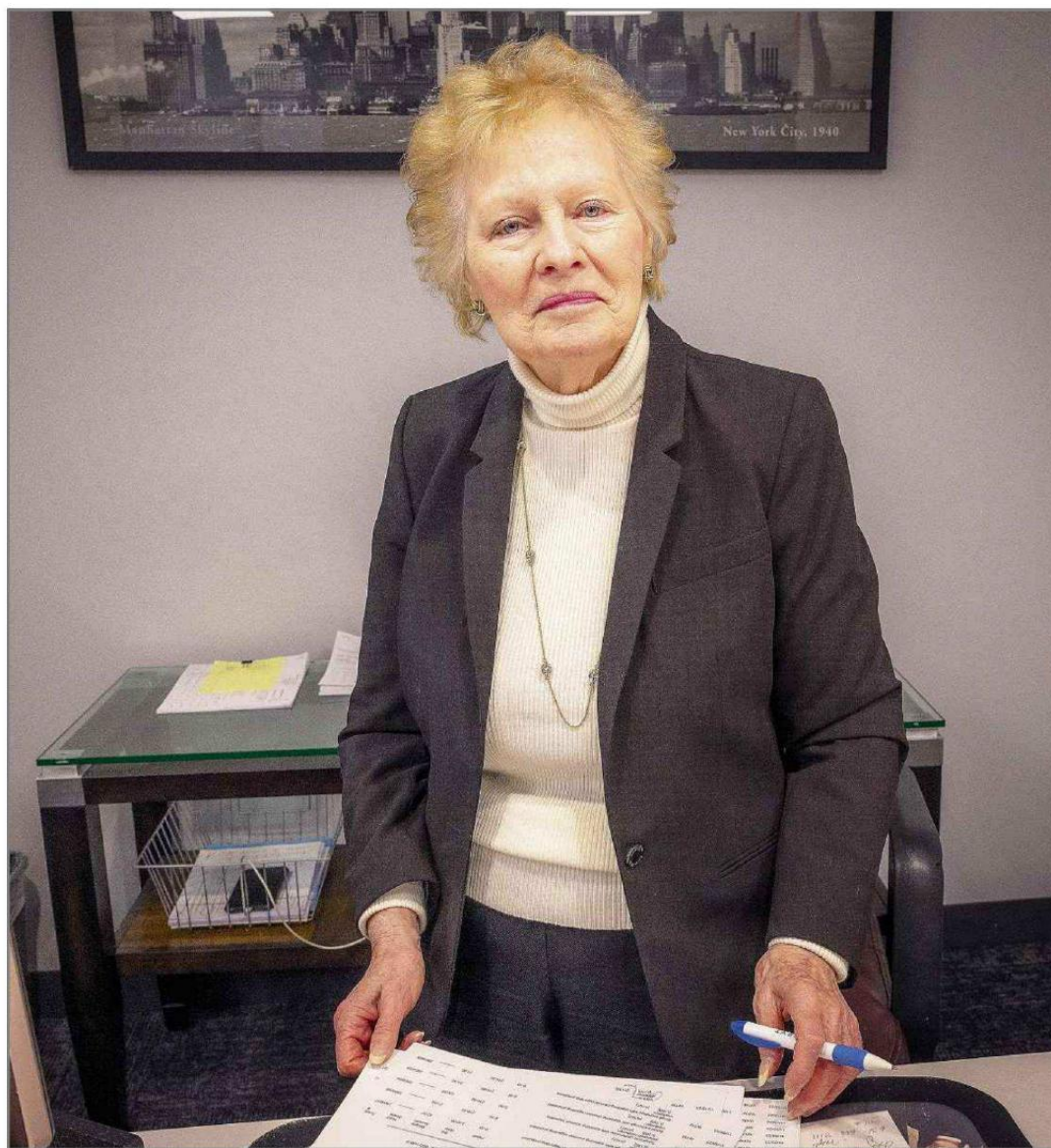
Tucker got her first job out of high school at age 17 in New Jersey, which was expected in a family with 10 children.

She started as a file clerk with an insurance carrier in 1955, eventually overseeing 13 women. She also worked for a time in a family restaurant and then as a bank clerk. In 1978, as a divorced mother of three, she became an assistant to the vice president at the brokerage house Adams & Porter in New York City.

She commuted then from Staten Island and, like many working mothers, cobbled together before- and after-school care with female neighbors.

Through it all, her determination was shaped by her early experiences, which included living for a time in a shelter in Jamaica, Queens, at age 6 while her parents weren't able to care for her and her siblings.

"Always on my mind was to keep a roof over your head and



Mary Jane Tucker, seen at work in Melville, "is born of a different era," a co-worker says.

food on the table," Tucker said. "So I very rarely took a day off because I wanted to make sure that I never lost a job. I couldn't; I had three children."

In 1981, she became a manager for Pepitone Properties Corp., a commercial property management and brokerage firm then on Franklin Avenue in Garden City. That's where she met the founding partners of what is now L'Abbate, Balkan, Colavita & Contini.

Susan Warshaw, 69, the firm's director of finance who started there in 1983, said, "There was a very small office at the time; there were only three attorneys, so we had the building [staff] answer the phone for us. When the firm outgrew the space there and moved, since Mary Jane was ab-

solutely the best receptionist in that pool of receptionists for the building, we took the opportunity to steal her away."

Voice of the firm

Warshaw added, "It's hard to put in into words what Mary Jane has meant to our firm. She was always the first person you saw when you walked in. She is the most gracious person that there is, and she makes every client feel at home. Every person on the phone feels like they're getting a friendly voice."

Rice, who joined the firm in 1996, was one of them. She knew Tucker before she knew the partners. "I've known her since before I came to this firm, when I would call the front desk and she would be

the one to answer.

Tucker's role has evolved over the years, since these days many of the attorneys get direct dials from clients. While Tucker still manages the front desk, during the shutdown, Warshaw asked her to help edit the pre-bills. Rice said that was lifesaving to the firm. "We have 35 attorneys, and if you don't put in the right codes on the bills, it would be a huge cog, so we need Mary Jane to edit them," Rice said.

Warshaw agreed, adding, "It's a very difficult job to read the attorneys' handwriting."

For her part, Tucker said she didn't enjoy working from home during the shutdown. While the firm has continued to have a hybrid setup, she insists on working five days a

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— Mary Jane Tucker

week in the office. Her husband of 20 years, Ed Tucker, drives her in at 8:30 a.m. and home at 5 p.m. each day.

No desire to retire

Tucker, who still comes to work meticulously dressed in business attire, said she has no plans to retire. "I know it looks almost comedic that I am still working, but I always felt safe having a job."

After struggling her entire work life until she could afford her own house, Tucker finally bought one in Levittown 22 years ago when her husband retired. She plans to keep working to pay the mortgage. "I feel like this house is a gift for working a long time," she said.

Tucker had a setback when she broke her shoulder in January. Though it was shattered and required surgery and a steel rod, she never thought about not coming back to work.

Tucker said, "The doctor kept saying, 'Mary Jane, you're 84. The company's not going to fold if you don't go back.' I told him that was not nice."

She returned to the office in June.

Rice said the attorneys were relieved: "Those months when she wasn't here were hard months."

Tucker has made an impact on new employees as well.

Elizabeth Savasta, 43, who joined the firm as director of administration in October, said that Tucker is a "powerful example to other people about dedication, loyalty and stick-to-itiveness."

"Mary Jane is born of a different era so she's not going to be your typical professional. But she's a good combination of the old Donna Reed era and the new working woman," said Warshaw.