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PERSONS OF THE YEAR: Gretchen M. Nelson **Los Angeles County Bar President Known For Her Commitment to Justice**

By STEVEN M. ELLIS, Staff Writer

Los Angeles County Bar Association President Gretchen M. Nelson's father was setting an example that would one day guide the career of his daughter—then a college freshman—but she had no idea.

James A. Nelson—a former U.S. Navy test pilot who had earned both his business and law degrees at night while working full time administering government contracts for the University of Maryland's atom-splitting cyclotron—was trying his first case.

He was representing Charles Jackson, an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture who had been denied promotion at his post at a Maryland research station for 20 years because he was African American, even though he held a master's degree and the same credentials as his fellow employees.

But the rest of the Nelson family was oblivious.

"I don't think my mom even knew that he was in trial," Gretchen Nelson, 53, of Kreindler & Kreindler, LLP says.

James Nelson had worked on the case at night out of the little office in the basement of the family's Arlington, Va. home while he continued to work fulltime supporting his wife and three daughters, two of whom were in college. After a trial that lasted less than two weeks, he prevailed, and Jackson received back pay for the years in which his career had been suppressed.

"Charlie Jackson was just the sweetest man who had worked all his life...and just kept getting screwed," Gretchen Nelson says. "My dad...got it all back for him...That's what the law was for."

Without publicity or splash, James Nelson had demonstrated an ideal to which his daughter would one day aspire: fighting for social justice.

Born in California while her father tested fighter jets for McDonnell Douglas, Gretchen Nelson "bounced all over" with her family during her early years. Her father, who had previously flown in World War II and later flew jets off of aircraft carriers for NATO, moved the family to Florida, to Norway, back to Florida, and then to Virginia—all before she finished elementary school.

The family settled in Virginia, and after high school Nelson attended Smith College, a private liberal arts college in Northampton, Mass. She intended to study

history and go on to law school, following in her father's footsteps.

But Nelson discovered a love for music, so she switched her major to music performance, concentrating on the piano. After graduating, she took a job with arts management agency Herbert Barrett Management in New York City, but eventually admitted to herself that a career as a concert pianist was unlikely.

Father's Example

Reflecting on her father's example, she decided to resume her original plan and become an attorney.

"There were some wonderful things that he did as a lawyer representing people who would never have had their rights vindicated if he had not taken them on, and I was really kind of overwhelmed by that," she says. "I thought that was a pretty terrific thing, so I decided to do it."

Nelson attended law school at Georgetown University and graduated in 1983. Unsure of where she wanted to practice, she took note that a number of her peers who had already taken one bar exam received job offers in California, forcing them to take its bar exam as well.

"I said, 'man I'm not doing that,'" she recalls, so she applied to take the California exam and was admitted to the State Bar of California in January of 1984.

After "trying desperately to find a job" for the first few months while working worked nights proofreading at Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP, Nelson landed an interview at the Orange County office of Morgan, Wenzel & McNicholas. However, she misjudged the distance, and arrived two hours late.

"Being from the East Coast, I was completely clueless on how far away Orange County was," she says.

Fortunately, the hiring partners referred her back to the firm's Los Angeles branch where she was ultimately offered a position, and she began practicing in spring of that year.

Walter M. Yoka, now of Yoka & Smith LLP, worked with Nelson at the firm during her early years and observed her work firsthand.

"She is an absolutely spectacular lawyer," he says. "More importantly, she is one of the greatest persons I've ever known."

Cerritos Air Disaster

Although most of the Nelson's early cases involved insurance defense, she began representing plaintiffs in aviation law cases, most notably in a case involving the Cerritos Air Disaster, which occurred Aug. 31, 1986 when Aeroméxico Flight 498 and a private plane collided in mid-air, killing 67 people aboard the two aircraft and 15 on the ground.

Jennifer J. Johnston of Condon & Forsyth LLP, who represented Aeroméxico in subsequent litigation, recalls conducting damages depositions with Nelson, who represented victims' relatives. The depositions focused on the relationships of Nelson's clients to the crash victims.

"It was very difficult," Johnston says, but Nelson "had a way of making a

difficult situation less painful and making it go as smoothly as possible. She prepared her clients so they understood why I was asking the questions I asked, and so that they weren't scared or offended by the process.

"Gretchen was always someone who could be there for her clients not only legally, but also emotionally. She made sure they knew that someone cared and someone understood."

In 1988, Nelson joined the law firm of Corinblit & Seltzer, where she began to represent plaintiffs exclusively—a focus which continues to this day.

Jack Corinblit, now retired, says that he was struck by the warmth of Nelson's personality. "After we were introduced, it was as if I had known her forever," he remarks.

Corinblit says that the confidence Nelson exuded in their first meeting—which made him "trust in her immediately"—was important because she spent her early years at the firm litigating on behalf of class claimants while coordinating with a number of other law firms around the country.

"We were always fighting against much bigger firms, so we had to have a lawyer who was much more than just a lawyer," he recalls. "We had to have a lawyer in whom the whole class could have confidence, and who the court overseeing the action could trust to watch out for claimants' interests."

Nelson "fit into it like a glove," he says. "She was a great lawyer for what she was doing, even as an associate, and she demonstrated her ability very early."

Mark M. Seltzer says that he hired Nelson because of her enthusiasm and her "evident legal ability." Reflecting on her subsequent career, he says that she "exemplifies what we all aspire to be as lawyers."

Corinblit retired in 1998 and Seltzer joined Susman Godfrey, LLP to open its Los Angeles office, so Nelson struck out on her own as a sole practitioner.

Kreindler & Kreindler

However, in 2003 New York attorney Marc S. Moller of Kreindler & Kreindler LLP, who knew Nelson from her days at Morgan, Wenzel & McNicholas, approached her with the idea of opening a Los Angeles office for the firm and becoming its managing partner.

Moller says that he and his partners decided that Nelson was the right person for the job because "her handling of class action matters in the securities field was very impressive..., her knowledge of the law was exemplary, and she was well respected by the judiciary."

Nelson remains managing partner of the office to this day.

"We knew that if we hitched our stars to one another it would be a good marriage," Moller says. "We were right."

James D. Nichols of Bonne Bridges Mueller O'Keefe & Nichols says that one of the major reasons for Nelson's success is her "presence."

"There are a lot of lawyers out there that are...not the sharpest in court or in front of people," he says. "Gretchen...will walk in and argue, and you'll say to

yourself, 'wow, that's good.' ”

Nichols also points to Nelson's preparedness in court.

“I've never argued against her myself,” he says, “and I wouldn't hesitate to do so. But I would really dot my i's and cross my t's.”

Today, Nelson describes herself as a “jack of all trades” without one main practice area, but she still prefers class action litigation.

“While you can be representing entities on occasion, largely you are working for a lot of little people, and I really have a strong feeling about that,” she reflects.

She says the case that had the greatest impact on her personally was one she took on during her solo practice where she successfully helped a young doctor regain her license to practice medicine after it was revoked.

“That was a very hard case because it was so devastating to her,” she recalls. “She had been a young doctor and she basically had it taken all away....My heart went out to her. It would be like representing a lawyer who's worked all their life to become a lawyer, and then four years later their ticket's pulled and they can't do anything.”

Calling the case her “toughest battle,” Nelson is proud that she stuck with it.

“I, on many occasions, wanted to back out,” she says, “but I kept slogging along and ended up with a nice victory for her.”

County Bar

Nelson says she became involved in the Los Angeles County Bar Association in the mid-1990's because of British writer and barrister Sir John Mortimer, QC, creator and writer of the Rumpole of the Bailey series of books and television and radio programs. Mortimer had authored a new book in the series, and his publisher contacted Nelson to set up an event in Los Angeles as part of his book tour.

Nelson decided to put together a dinner program, but quickly realized she was in over her head, so she contacted the association for help. Its Litigation Section allowed her to use its mailing list and, after the event proved successful, invited Nelson to join its executive committee to help with other programs.

She eventually became an officer, and then chair, of the committee. She also became a member of the association's Board of Trustees, working her way into the officer levels and becoming president in July of 2007.

Increasing diversity within the legal profession is the overriding theme of her presidency, Nelson says, in particular increasing diversity in large law firms and on the bench, and keeping women attorneys who leave the practice to focus on their families engaged in the law.

“There is really a struggle that women have to deal with...and we're losing a huge number of women,” she says. “If we keep them in the law, either part time or even through volunteer work...you can keep the diversity of having women involved.”

She is also concerned about making sure that the Los Angeles Superior Court has adequate facilities, especially the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in downtown Los

Angeles, in light of the assumption of responsibility over courthouses by the state through the Administrative Office of the Courts.

'Friend' of Court

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Lee S. Edmon cites Nelson's efforts in appointing a committee to study any future plans for maintenance and improvements of court facilities, as well as her regular meetings with the court's leadership and the AOC, in recognizing Nelson as a "great friend of the court."

"She is passionate about the justice system, and wants justice for all," Edmon says.

Having worked with Nelson on projects both through the court and through the bar association, Edmon, a former LACBA president, says she regards Nelson highly.

"She is an extremely effective leader of the bar, and she makes people want to contribute their time and support her," Edmon says.

Deputy District Attorney Danette E. Meyers, who will become Nelson's successor as the association's president in June, has a similar opinion, calling Nelson "probably the most committed president we've ever had."

Nelson's "goal is that everyone be able to express their views on issues," Meyers says, and "she really brings people together. No other president has done so in this way before and been so successful."

LACBA Executive Director Stuart A. Forsyth concurs, praising Nelson's ability to reach out and relate to members and affiliated associations.

"She has done wonders with relationships," he says.

Meyers says that Nelson's success as president reflects her commitment to the legal profession, and to the principles of justice, fairness and equality. As illustration, she points to Nelson's recent actions after Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf declared emergency rule, and imprisoned protesting judges and lawyers.

Nelson told the association that it needed to make a statement and, after holding a meeting to discuss the matter, went personally to meet with the consul general of Pakistan for Los Angeles to seek an end to emergency rule, re-imposition of the rule of law, and the release of attorneys and judges still confined in jail or under house arrest.

"It really made the reasons why you became a lawyer come to the forefront," Meyers says.

Nelson still loves music—she holds season tickets to the Los Angeles Opera—and she has a passion for animals. A member of the Glendale Humane Society, she keeps horses at a ranch she co-owns with Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Margaret L. Oldendorf.

Cowboy Lawyer

She is also a former president and current member of the Cowboy Lawyers Association, and says that riding with the group has allowed her to see places and sights most people in California never have the chance to view.

Nichols, a fellow member, recalls a dramatic experience on one of the group's

trail rides a few years ago. The riders were approaching a cliff, led by attorney William A. Daniels, when Daniels' horse went over the edge. Daniels suffered a broken arm, but his horse was killed.

"He was lucky the horse didn't fall on him, or he would have been killed" Nichols says.

Nelson immediately volunteered to ride for help.

"My heart was in my throat as she set off on her gray Arab," Nichols recounts. "She really laid into it. We could see her for miles away, kicking up dust."

He says that he and the others were glad that Nelson "was on the job, because we knew she'd get it done."

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Victor E. Chavez recalls a less dramatic story, when Nelson "was late for her own birthday party."

Chavez and his wife, who were hosting the party, became concerned when party guests arrived, but Nelson did not.

"We found out later that she had stopped to rescue an abandoned dog she found by the side of the road," he says.

Nelson also enjoys spending time with her family, especially her "most excellent" niece and nephew, and her father, who in his 80s still practices law in Toledo, Wash., in the southwest part of the state, where he is the only attorney in town. Calling her an "outstanding writer," Nelson's father chuckles when he recounts how he has often been singled out for praise in connection with briefs he filed, when his daughter actually wrote them on his behalf.

Nelson says that her goals for the future are to try more cases—"I haven't tried enough and I'd like to try a lot more," she says—and to continue to try to live her life in a more meaningful way.

"We had a great wake up call when [Court of Appeal Justice] Paul Boland died [last year]," she says. "His life was big things, but it was all done on an individual basis, accomplishing so much by little things that are so meaningful to everyone, from the law clerk to his deputy clerk, to the young barrister in the L.A. County Bar.

"I suppose if I were to die tomorrow, I would wish I had done more to live my life like [him]."

She places a high value on the role of attorneys in society.

"To me, there's more that you can do as a lawyer than you can do in any other profession," she remarks, "and my philosophy is that's a role we have to take very much to heart and keep it very precious and make sure that we honor that role."

Nelson's contemporaries say that this philosophy is evident in her practice.

"She is not only a very able lawyer but an effective, compassionate bar leader with a social conscience," Phillip H. Lam, an intellectual property lawyer for the City of Los Angeles, comments.

Venice attorney George Shohet, who recently worked with Nelson on a "challenging" shareholder derivative case before the California Supreme Court notes that Nelson shouldered the major expenses of the case without receiving "a penny of

compensation.”

“If there’s anybody you want on your team, it would be Gretchen,” he remarks. “Nobody has more integrity; nobody has a greater conscience; nobody is more selfless.”

Values Civility

Nelson also places a premium on civility.

“You have to like and respect your opponent because he or she is doing their job,” she says.

Her adversaries say this quality is equally evident in her practice. Nicholas S. Politis of Flynn Delich & Wise refers to her as a “worthy opponent,” and “a pleasure to deal with in the practice of law,” while Eric S. Waxman of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP says that Nelson proves that an attorney does not have to sacrifice civility in order to remain “a tough advocate.”

Perhaps most importantly, Nelson’s father says that she has lived up to the example he set when he first began practicing.

“She is top notch,” James Nelson says. “She is concerned about the underdog, and willing to go to bat and do whatever it takes.”

He continues, “I’m definitely proud of her. Always have been.”

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