

# The Tough Love of Justice Kennard

By Linda Birch, Published in the Pasadena City College "Spotlight" Magazine, 2008

A judge's judge and apolitical champion of the law, PCC alumna Justice Joyce Kennard has been called "the bulldog of the high-court bench" for exercising a tenacious intellect that won't let go of a lawyer arguing a point until she has shaken out the bit of Truth she was seeking. If she's tough in court, keep in mind she's doing it all for love--of the law--and beneath her cool, almost stern demeanor is a kind, supportive mentor who has been nurturing students that now number a small army, a living legacy in itself.

"You must always be mindful that neutrality is important, even when a case is notorious-or dreadful-and we do get dreadful cases-but that is when it is more important than ever to remain impartial in applying the law," says Justice Joyce L. Kennard, the longest-serving member of California's Supreme Court. "Sometimes it's difficult for the public to understand, but your hands are tied. You have to be neutral."

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One former intern, Tim Perry said, "she has a certain persona on the bench. She's very challenging in court, but in her chambers she's a gentle, caring, funny, empathetic mentor. She is genuinely thinking about you." Perry now serves as an attorney practicing appellate and bankruptcy law. "You know, among her interns, we've talked and it's been said that if Justice Kennard weren't a judge, she'd be a movie star--she is just that charismatic."

Perry isn't exaggerating. When I meet Kennard in her chambers in San Francisco, she is perfectly dressed, elegantly coiffed and, it's true, so charming she already had me at "Hello"-- long before she concluded our interview with a personal tour of the courtroom where California's high court holds its regular sessions.

"You see this painting," Kennard says, indicating a vast California landscape by artist Walter Dixon which rises behind the justices to the domed ceiling, reaching across all seven seats of the high court.

"It gives attorneys something to look at if they get bored during the proceedings," she jokes modestly, although only sorry lawyers would let art lull them into any state of being other than on their tiptoes if Kennard is in the house.

Intellectually tenacious, she has a demeanor that is almost stern as she asks intricate questions in a firm, clear voice with a refined accent that demands logical explanations supported by legal precedents.

A smaller painting by Dixon hangs in the lobby outside her office where she takes a moment to show a photo of the person with whom she'll be dining at Le Chien, a favorite restaurant, because Kennard loves good food with good company.

In fact, she adores a lot of things: the opera, symphony concerts, the arts, the entire city of San Francisco, a certain black-and-white cat, and her many friends.

Perhaps these passions are what makes it possible to bear the workload of being one of only seven people whose shoulders carry the weight of legal issues that impact 34 million Californians.

There is a warmth to her face as she leads through pages of notes, hundreds of them protected in separate plastic sleeves in a white, 4-inch binder, all neatly maintained by her over-assistant of the past 16 years, Beverly Gong. There are more of those binders, five in all. In common, Kennard is sharing treasured family albums of her protégées whose paths have come through the revolving door of her chambers and since departed in various legal directions.

Yet they all remain connected to each other by the steel bonds of a strong network forged by a woman ever mindful of the encouragement she received when she was a young student embarking on a journey that would take her to the top.

Kennard finds the page she is looking for and points out the photograph, lightly tracing the face of the woman in the photo who immigrated here and, like Kennard, attended law school without the emotional and financial support of family. Her country the woman are a half dozen people, and Kennard easily identifies who's who by name as former interns and a federal judge. Her benevolent regard for all is apparent.

"Fantastic," was how Shabnam (Chattak) described her internship with Kennard. "It was a good learning experience. Move that just here to research, analyze and write--although that's a good part of being an attorney--she taught me how to argue before a judge, what to say, how to dress for court--just a well-rounded approach. And she takes care of her interns." Others concur.

"More so than other judges, she really takes time with her interns," said Alex Drah, now in house counsel for a tech company. "Presenting to her and her staff of career attorneys could be an incredibly intimidating experience for a young law student, but it would force you to do the preparation you need to do to succeed as a lawyer."

So does Kennard's tough love for the law. Independent and still going strong, serving up disciplined, intellectually rigorous decisions, long after Kennard retires her gavel, her living legacy of counseled consciences will be signifying legal nuances, carrying on her torch for the law and order in courtrooms of tomorrow.

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