

HSBA Family Connections: Highlighting & profiling family ties within the Hawaii State Bar Association

This month's interview features Christy P. Gray, an associate at Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing and her mother, Donna M. Gray, a former criminal defense attorney for the Honolulu Office of the Federal Public Defender.



Christy P. Gray is an associate at Honolulu law firm Alston Hunt Floyd & Ing, where her current practice focuses on labor and employment law. Prior to that, Christy served as law clerk to the Honorable Michael Wilson in First Circuit Court in the State of Hawaii and worked as a Deputy District Attorney in California for nine years.

During her tenure as a prosecutor in California, Christy tried numerous jury trials, conducted preliminary and evidentiary hearings, and appeared in court on an almost daily basis. Her assignments included the Public Assistance Fraud Unit, handling the prosecution and investigation of individuals who committed fraud in obtaining medical insurance, Section 8 housing, child care, cash and nutrition (food stamps) assistance.

Christy earned her J.D. from the University of San Diego School of Law. She was admitted to the California State Bar in 2001 and to the Hawaii State Bar in 2012. She received her B.A. in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles, and is a graduate of Punahou School.

What was difficult and what was valuable about your experience as a Deputy District Attorney in California?

A prosecutor carries the power to bring an individual into the criminal justice system by charging them with a crime. It is difficult to carry that burden and to use that power in a just manner. On a professional level, the most valuable experience I gained as a Deputy District Attorney was my experience in a courtroom and in trials learning to advocate effectively, use the evidence code and question witnesses.

Growing up, what did you learn from your mom's experience as a criminal defense attorney that influenced you?

My mom graduated from law school and became a Deputy Federal Public Defender while I was in high school. I witnessed how much dedication and hard work it takes to become an attorney. Once I was attending law school and then practicing criminal law myself in California, my mom really helped me to understand my role as an advocate and the value in always being professional and courteous to colleagues and opposing counsel.



Photo: Christy and her parents at her law school graduation from the University of San Diego School of Law.

What lessons can you share with other women who are looking to balance a career and family life?

Remember it is exactly that – a balance. If you want to have both, you have to give time to both. I love having a career and a being a mom, but it is a challenge and often requires sacrifices. I have learned to be realistic and understand it is a balancing act. There are times when one will likely have to give way to the other and vice versa.

What advice would you give to those considering law school?

Be ready to work hard! But it will be worth it. Don't worry if you don't yet know exactly what kind of law you want to practice or whether you want to practice at all. A law degree can be valuable in many other careers, including, but not limited to, business, government, law enforcement, and teaching.

Donna M. Gray is a former criminal defense attorney for the Honolulu Office of the Federal Public Defender. Donna served for 25 years as a Deputy Federal Public Defender in the federal court representing the indigent accused in criminal cases, including numerous criminal jury trials. She retired from the Office of the Federal Public Defender last December and currently consults on an occasional basis for private litigation matters.

Donna earned her J.D. from the William S. Richardson School of Law and is a graduate of the University of Hawaii and St. Joseph's Academy (high school) in Brooklyn, New York. She was admitted to the Hawaii State Bar in 1987.

How has the practice of law changed since you were first admitted to the Bar?



I began practicing 25 years ago. The day-to-day practice of law has, in my view, been significantly changed by technology. Twenty-five years ago you would go down to the courthouse and wait in line and file a document with the clerk; now you just push a button and your document is e-filed instantly. That is just one example. I practiced criminal defense, so many of my clients were incarcerated awaiting final disposition of their case. The only way I could communicate with them when I began my practice was by letter or a visit to the prison. Today federal inmates are allowed to communicate with their attorneys, as well as their families, by e-mail.

Photo: Donna at her law school graduation from the William S. Richardson School of Law.

Your experience with criminal cases, including many jury trials, is undeniably stressful. How did you manage the stress and what did you find rewarding about your work?

Managing stress is difficult for probably all lawyers, whether they are in or out of the courtroom. I think the best way to manage stress is to have a life outside of your career. Family and friends are very important, so just going home to your family at the end of the day, or meeting up with a friend for a run or even a walk or a movie and a bite to eat - that kind of thing has always been helpful to me. Also, don't be a lawyer seven days a week, take at least one day off.

What are some of the valuable lessons you learned throughout your career?

It sounds simple, but the most valuable lesson for me was to be quiet and just listen. Whether it is your client, the Judge or even opposing counsel, just listen and think before you speak. Lawyers tend to want to talk a lot! The other thing is another simple but important lesson: you will make mistakes, learn from them, don't let them defeat you.

What advice would you give to recent law school graduates?

Beginning the practice of law after law school is certainly an eye-opener because there is so much about the practice of law that you don't learn in law school! So, I think the best advice is to take it one day at a time and then after 10 years or so you'll eventually get the hang of it. Also, don't let your ego get in the way of your practice of law. It is not about you, it is about the client and how best to serve the client and the community.