

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

This month's interview features **Joseph Toma**, founder of Joseph T. Toma Attorney at Law on Maui, and his daughter **Sonya Toma**, associate at Joseph T. Toma Attorney at Law. The firm is transitioning to the name Toma & Toma.



Joseph T. Toma graduated from Kaimuki High School and attended Indiana University and the John Marshall School of Law in Chicago. He was admitted to the Hawaii State Bar in 1983 and has previously worked as a prosecutor for the City and County of Honolulu and in the Office of the Public Defender in Honolulu and Maui before opening his private practice, Joseph T. Toma Attorney at Law, on Maui. The firm practice areas include family law, criminal defense, bankruptcy, personal injury, civil litigation, and immigration.

Growing up on Oahu, what was your experience going away for both your undergraduate and law school education? What was valuable about going away for school?

When I went away to Indiana University it was the very first time I left the state of Hawaii. Bloomington, Indiana is located about 60 miles south of Indianapolis and is a rural, college town community. I would liken my experience to an alien transportation; I had to adjust to new food and everything after being deposited in rural Indiana. I arrived in the early morning hours and slept on a sofa in one of the cafeterias before checking into my dorm room the next day. I remember having traveled in a coat and tie. But my Indiana friends and their families were very nice and I was always invited to their homes for the holidays. I also struck up close friendships with two other kids from Oahu, Lester Kanemaru, now a dentist, and Pakala Fernandez, a musician. We used to get together in search of local style food, and would often wind up trying to cook it, badly.

For law school I went to the city of Chicago for the urban experience, which was a nice change of pace, and practiced law in Chicago and its suburbs for about five years after graduation. I rode the "El" train every day to school and then work. Mayor Richard J. Daley was still the mayor of Chicago, mobster Sam Giancana was assassinated one village away from my residence, Walter Payton was a rookie for the Chicago Bears and serial murderer John Wayne Gacy lived a few blocks away and I got to see his home dismantled and dug up for corpses. At the Dirksen Federal Building across the street from my law school I also witnessed hearings on the "Chicago 7" trial (Vietnam war protesters) and got to see Muhammad Ali close up outside court while he was attending a civil hearing in Chicago.

Expenses permitting, I would encourage high school students to leave the state for post graduate education.

How does your experience as a city prosecutor and in the Office of the Public Defender help you in your private practice today?

The best experience gained from both of those jobs comes primarily from the sheer volume of cases and trials handled. If your plan is to do trial work then the best place to start is one of these two offices. You find yourself going to trial whether you like it or not. I am very grateful for having had the chance to work at both places, being hired by prosecuting attorney Charles Marsland and public defender Barry Rubin, respectively.

What are your professional beliefs that you find tried and true?

I have always championed the "small guy" and underdog, and the great thing about our profession is that a favorable outcome for a client can truly make a big difference in his or her life or future. Even with unfavorable odds on cases, there are many goals and factors that can be achieved to minimize otherwise negative and devastating consequences.

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

The change that I have seen is with the appointment of judges. When I first started practicing law the new judges were almost always appointed at the district court level first, and circuit court and appellate vacancies were filled by district judges. About twenty years ago newbie judges started getting appointed straight to the circuit and appellate courts. I liked the old system better, with an apprenticeship of sorts, you knew you had a judge who had been around the block a few times, and could put things in perspective.



Joseph T. Toma and daughter at the Bar admission ceremony in 1983.

What are the advantages and disadvantages (if any) to practicing on a Neighbor Island?

The advantage with practicing law on Maui is the convenience and access to the courts, Hoapili Hale in Wailuku houses the circuit court, the district court, the family court, the juvenile court, and all other courts. For the most part it is a one stop shop, except for the traffic and district court civil cases in Lahaina and Hana, and on the islands of Lanai and Molokai.

The disadvantages are the rising costs of travel to Oahu to visit with my aging parents and brother, and to hang out on Oahu where I grew up and still enjoy visiting. Restaurant lunch choices within walking distance are limited. There is no Chinatown on Maui.

What advice would you give to recent law school graduates?

Financially, get rid of your student loan debt as soon as possible, and start a retirement fund with regular contributions as soon as possible.

Professionally, keep the attitude that your job is to “kick some ---.” In a philosophical and professional manner I might add, that is, to benefit your client to the max. The practice of law and nature of business in America, all adversarial based, require it.



Sonya Toma graduated from Baldwin High School and attended the University of Oregon for her undergraduate degree and the William S. Richardson School of Law for her law degree. Sonya was admitted to the Hawaii State Bar in 2007. She has previously worked as a law clerk for Judge Richard T. Bissen, Jr. and in the Office of the Public Defender in Hilo and Maui. Sonya is a board member of the Maui County Bar Association.

Where did you attend high school and what were your hobbies?

I attended Baldwin High School. I didn't participate in many extracurricular activities but I enjoyed reading, music and concerts, movies, going to the beach and hanging out with my friends and family. I also enjoyed visiting my grandparents on Oahu and family on the mainland.

How does your minor in business administration help you in your practice today?

A small firm is essentially a small business. Not only do you have to focus on your clients and caseload, you also have to consider the day-to-day expenses—taxes, payroll, rent, etc.—

that you generally don't have to think about when you work for the government or as an associate at a large firm. It helps to have a basic understanding of business concepts like accounting, finance advertising and marketing when you are involved in managing a small practice.

How did your father influence your decision to pursue a career in law?

I began helping at the public defender's office when I was in 8th grade. I would do the court run. I worked my father's office after school when he went into private practice. I learned how to be a legal secretary, which has helped me tremendously in practicing law. After graduating high school and going to college, I would still help out when I was home for the summer and on breaks.

My father was always supportive of me during law school and in my legal career. He instilled in me the values which I believe are important in the practice of law: civility, integrity and zealous advocacy. I admire him for always being ready to confront difficult legal challenges and for always standing up for the little guy.



Sonya Toma with father and grandparents at the Bar admission ceremony in 2007.

What were some of the valuable lessons you learned as a law clerk for Second Circuit Court Judge Richard T. Bissen, Jr.?

I would recommend that every law school graduate spend time as a law clerk for a Judge. I was able to observe many jury trials, which helped me learn litigation skills. I also learned how the court functions "behind the scenes." You are able to observe what qualities good lawyers have and learn lessons from others' mistakes, without having to make them yourself.

What was your experience as a deputy public defender in Hilo and Maui? Did the experience differ much?

There were many similarities and some differences. At first I was reluctant to take a job in Hilo, but it ended up being a positive and enriching experience. I'm so glad that I worked there. I also truly enjoyed my time at the public defender's office on Maui. There is an incredible camaraderie in both offices. You are part of a family. It was also interesting to meet or reconnect with attorneys that had worked with my father. Sometimes the work was difficult, but at the end of the day, you are helping people and ensuring that their rights are protected. It was very fulfilling to work at both offices.

What advice would you give to those thinking about attending law school?

I took some time off between college and law school. I think it helped me to be more mature and ready to tackle the demands of law school. When you are in law school my advice would be to keep things in perspective and maintain a balanced life.

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