



Hon. Christine Donelian Coughlin

Administrative Law Judge, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

by Hon. Alisa Tapia-Zuniga



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Judge Christine Donelian Coughlin is kind, humble, and unassuming—and has an impressive legal mind. It is a great honor to write her judicial profile.

The Sea Wave and the Charm

A second-generation Armenian American, Judge Coughlin was born the youngest of four siblings and raised largely in West Palm Beach, Fla., to military parents. Judge Coughlin takes great pride in her parents' sacrifice and dedicated service to our nation. During World War II, her mother served in the women's military branch in the U.S. Naval Reserve for WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). Her father served as a lead bombardier-navigator in the 398th of the 8th Air Force 1st Air Division known as the "Mighty Eight." The Mighty Eight was one of the B-17 Flying Fortress Bomb Groups stationed in England for the U.S. Army Air Corps. Her father earned the nickname "The Charm" for surviving a remarkably high number of missions. She fondly recounts, "They loved our country dearly and instilled that sense of pride in me."

Judge Coughlin's parents and strong-willed siblings were also positive role models for pursuing a solid education and establishing a strong work ethic. Her parents, who owned a small business, taught her the value of discipline, responsibility, and hard work. She was encouraged to be independent and to pursue her interests and dreams. As a young child, Judge Coughlin developed her first passion— theater. She participated in plays in high school and took acting classes in college. She vividly recalls performing a 20-minute monologue, portraying a woman covered in tattoos, sitting at a bar, reflecting on the tough life she had led. After her performance, her classmates were left speechless. Judge Coughlin's professor encouraged her to pursue a career in theater. But, as life would have it, she took a different path.

Taking the Easy Road Through Physics

In 1983, Judge Coughlin attended Tulane University in New Orleans. For two years, she worked as a research assistant for optical physics professor Dr. Robert H.



Morriss. While assisting Dr. Morriss, she contributed toward two academic publications that dealt with the color theory of Albert H. Munsell (the inventor of the Munsell color system). In 1987, she earned a Bachelor of Science in physics.

With a goal-oriented determination, Judge Coughlin decided that regardless of her ultimate career path she would pursue a degree in law. As she viewed it, a law degree would provide her with useful life skills. In pursuit of that goal, Judge Coughlin worked for the Client Assistance Program at the Public Defender's Office at the 15th Judicial Circuit in West Palm Beach, Fla. She interviewed defendants and assisted and facilitated their nonlegal needs. She also functioned as a liaison between defendants and their appointed counsel. It was through this position that Judge Coughlin met her future husband, a charming, newly hired assistant public defender Patrick Coughlin.

From 1988 to 1991, Judge Coughlin attended the University of Miami School of Law. As a law student, Judge Coughlin was accepted to work as a judicial extern for the late Hon. James C. Paine at the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida. She fondly recalls, "It was an invaluable experience to work in the office of such a distinguished judge." After graduating from law school, Judge Coughlin was ad-

mitted to the Florida Bar and the U.S. Southern District of Florida and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Legal Career and Administrative Law

Judge Coughlin's distinguished legal career began briefly as an assistant public defender. Soon after, she resigned from her employment commitment to spend valuable time with her 42-year-old sister who was stricken with a terminal illness—precious time she treasures and for which she will be forever grateful. Judge Coughlin then worked as an assistant attorney general handling criminal appeals. Her long-standing legal position, however, was working as a hearing officer for the state of Florida. She presided over quasi-judicial proceedings resolving unemployment compensation appeals. In that position, Judge Coughlin quickly discovered that she enjoyed presiding over adversarial hearings. She recalls, "This work laid the groundwork for my path to becoming an administrative law judge and provided a wonderful training ground from which to gain invaluable experience in a judging role."

In 2011, Judge Coughlin received a lifetime appointment as an administrative law judge (ALJ) for the Social Security Administration (SSA). She worked at the hearing offices in Akron, Ohio, and Richmond, Va. Shortly thereafter, Judge Coughlin transferred to a supervisory position at the National Hearing Center (NHC) in Falls Church, Va. At NHC, she had the opportunity to work closely with the staff and attorney-writers. She enjoyed discussing case particularities with the writers and enjoyed helping them adapt to her approach to writing decisions. The most challenging aspect of supervising she found was handling personnel and administrative tasks and collectively trying to meet the administration's expectations regarding case disposition goals.

At NHC, Judge Coughlin's positive aura did not go unnoticed. Administrative Officer Christina Warren remembers her warmly. "Judge Coughlin had a calming demeanor in how she interacted with staff, attorneys, and claimants. Her confidence, patience, and self-assurance were infectious." In August 2013, Judge Coughlin accepted an ALJ appointment for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Warren recounts, "Although we were happy for Judge Coughlin when she joined the ranks of the EPA, it was a heartfelt loss for SSA."

As for working as an ALJ for the EPA, Judge Coughlin finds it a perfect fit. She presides over adversarial proceedings in civil enforcement cases. She appreciates the independence and autonomy of the position. Judge Coughlin explained that EPA cases are akin to full civil litigation practice. Case preparation is extensive. She issues initial decisions and orders on various motions, and oversees the administrative process. Each hearing is unique and, at times, has its challenges. Judge Coughlin finds it an exciting aspect of the work. She stated, "I enjoy the complexity of environmental law and the challenging issues to be resolved in our cases, often cases of first impression." Her caseload stems from a variety of environmental laws including the Clean Air and Clean

Water Act, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act; Toxic Substances Control Act; the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act; Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act; and the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. Equally important, Judge Coughlin enjoys the writing process and crafting clear, concise, well-reasoned, and legally correct decisions.

The EPA also participates in the ALJ Loan Program. The program enables Judge Coughlin to assist other federal agencies as an ALJ, which exposes her to other areas of the law. When Judge Coughlin was asked what she enjoyed most about adjudicating administrative cases, she stated, "I enjoy the craft and skill of making a good legal argument and as a judge, being on the receiving end of considering such arguments by the advocates that appear before me."

Through her vast experience, she has come to understand her calling in administrative adjudication. Without a doubt, Judge Coughlin has a genuine admiration for administrative law and her role as a judge. Judge Coughlin made many sacrifices to accomplish her goals, which she says makes her cherish her legal career that much more. Her systematic approach to all her accomplishments helped focus her career toward positions that she knew would further that interest. Mentoring law clerks and young lawyers is an expression of her gratitude. At every opportunity, she provides them with insight and guidance in pursuing a career in administrative law.

A Perfect Mentor

Judge Coughlin encourages young lawyers to be open to the possibilities of work within the discipline of administrative law. She notes that while one who pursues work as a civil servant makes financial sacrifices by foregoing higher salaries in the private sector, the work can be significant, challenging, and fulfilling. Her words of advice to young lawyers are to work hard and be open-minded to possibilities and opportunities that may present themselves. Stay humble, honest, and grounded—and do not be afraid to take chances.

Judge Coughlin emphasizes that the administrative adjudication process holds a valuable place in the government. "Thanks to the many dedicated and hardworking ALJs throughout the executive branch of the federal government, many cases are heard more expeditiously than if the parties were required to proceed in a federal district court, providing a benefit to both the parties to the case and district court dockets."

She is vigilant to ensure due process is provided to the parties in cases that appear before her. She explains that it is vital that our legal system provides people with equal and impartial justice under the law. Judge Coughlin states, "Through my work, I have been exposed to a wide array of individuals, businesses, and organizations. It has been an informative and humbling process. It has led me to become more understanding and patient in my work and my interpersonal dealings."

When asked what advice she would give lawyers interested in administrative law, Judge Coughlin emphasized that the position requires a great deal of flexibility. Some cases may settle on the eve of the hearing after thorough preparation. Some cases may be well-represented, while others may involve parties proceeding pro se requiring additional guidance through the administrative process. In addition, ALJs must also be mindful at all times of their actions and behaviors as decision-makers.

Family Life

Judge Coughlin is content in both her personal and professional career. She maintains it with spiritual focus and peacefulness and explains that life experiences and a strong faith in a higher being have been instrumental in her development. “When my spiritual house is in order, everything else falls into place.”

She enjoys taking long walks with Pat—her husband of 29 years—and their German shepherd, Minna. She is a nature lover

and enjoys cases that deal with protecting the environment. She has many passions, including photography, reading fiction, cooking/baking, attending the theater and musical performances, and watching movies. One of her biggest passions, however, is scuba diving with her husband in the beautiful waters of Indonesia.

Her philosophy in life is to be kind, inclusive, and humble. She believes in the saying, “People may not remember what you said to them, but they will remember how you made them feel.” To Judge Coughlin, it is essential to be open and not pass judgment to another individual’s views or perspectives even when they differ from your own—an essential element for a judge.

When asked how she would like to be remembered when she retires, she said that she wants to be recognized as a fair, kind, and dedicated legal professional who produced high-quality work. Without question, Judge Coughlin has already accomplished that goal through her impeccable career and her stamina and perseverance to stay the course. ☺

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These individuals are not just names in cases, and their problems are more than academic exercises. Learning how to provide legal advice to a client is invaluable to a law student’s development as a lawyer.

Similarly, a court internship provides a unique perspective into how courts view litigation and related issues, plus what a court considers important in deciding a case. Court personnel, from the judge to the law clerks to the clerk’s office, are required to be professional in their dealings with the parties and the public. Moreover, they should exhibit a sense of pride and responsibility in having the privilege of being public servants. Observing this type of professionalism educates law students about the responsibilities of practicing law. In addition, court observation provides a unique perspective on the “dos and don’ts” of practice and how to practice with civility opposing counsel and the court.

I asked my law clerks to explain the benefits of clerking. They both agreed that notwithstanding doing well in law school, time management in terms of their court assignments has reinforced the concept of meeting deadlines and prioritizing work. They also said that they will be better prepared to practice bankruptcy law because they had two years to study and learn the Bankruptcy Code and Rules. Notably, they both emphasized that working in chambers allowed them to ask questions without fear of not already knowing the answers. Moreover, my clerks commented that the decision-making process in chambers is different for the court than being an advocate. Peer review of their written work and potentially appellate

review of their work made them better understand that an accurate statement of the law and facts is critically important in their jobs. Finally, because many judges participate in judicial and bar activities, law clerks are exposed to many opportunities to participate in the legal community.

Bar activities and mentorship is where professional development occurs. While in a perfect world it should really start in law school, there are too many obstacles and demands for it to be effective unless the student is proactive in reaching out to lawyers and bar associations. That said, lawyers and judges should mentor law students into joining and being active in bar associations. I have been fortunate to have been a member of the FBA for roughly 25 years, and during that period, I have been a chapter officer and president, editor-in-chief of *The Federal Lawyer*, and chair of the Bankruptcy Section. While I have enjoyed being involved in many bar associations and activities, there is no other bar association that collectively promotes federal practice, supports the federal judiciary, and provides a lawyer the opportunity to participate in an area of law. Through a local chapter, section, or division, a young lawyer can immediately meet potential mentors and peers in a field. During the time I have been chair of the Bankruptcy Section, I have been fortunate to meet several remarkable young people who have a deep commitment to the practice of bankruptcy law. I hope that I have the privilege to mentor many more bankruptcy lawyers. ☺

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¹The Pensacola Division of the U.S. District Court has been utilizing the bankruptcy courthouse in Pensacola since it was forced to vacate its own courthouse in 2017 due to mold issues. Hurricane Michael destroyed the bankruptcy courthouse in Panama City in October 2018. Both scenarios make it difficult to conduct hearings or other proceedings within those divisions at this time.