



Hon. Cindy K. Jorgenson

U.S. District Judge, District of Arizona

Though some judges seem to need little encouragement to talk about themselves, the Hon. Cindy K. Jorgenson, district judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona, always creates dialogue. Similarly, on the bench, she listens to parties, asks questions, and ensures that everyone has the opportunity to be heard. Words like “cheerful,” “kind,” and “gracious” are regularly used to describe Judge Jorgenson.

“[Judge Jorgenson] was my mentor when I joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office in 1996, and I couldn’t have asked for a better role model. She is magnanimous, knowledgeable, and hardworking, and is very practical in her approach to practicing and applying the law. She is a kind person who is unaffected by her many accomplishments,” said Judge Jennifer Guerin Zips, now a peer of Judge Jorgenson on the district court bench.

But Judge Jorgenson’s interpersonal skills and social grace should not be misconstrued: she is highly competitive. A self-taught tennis player who represented her high school and eventually her college, Judge Jorgenson has always loved competition. “The thing I don’t think most people realize about Judge Jorgenson is that she is a very good athlete. She is great at golf and tennis. If you play against her, you better be prepared for a battle,” said District of Arizona’s U.S. Attorney John S. Leonardo.

Judge Jorgenson’s love for competition led her to a career in the dynamic, adversarial world of the courtroom, where she was a trial lawyer for nearly 20 years. Early on, however, Judge Jorgenson did not have any particular connection to the law. Instead, based on her parents’ strong influence, she simply decided to complete higher education. “My mother was born in Italy and immigrated in her 20s. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Arizona, her master’s degree in Madison,



Wisc., and her doctorate in Italy in romance languages. She taught Italian as a professor at the University of Arizona for many years while raising three children. My father attended Yale and graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1949.”

Judge Jorgenson names her parents as her role models. They both worked very hard to provide for their children. Judge Jorgenson’s father was a lieutenant commander in



Dillon Fishman served as an assistant U.S. attorney in the District of Arizona from September 2010–September 2013 and currently works as an attorney for the Department of Defense. He is also a Marine officer (now in the Reserves) and has deployed three times in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, including twice to Afghanistan.

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the Navy and then an engineer for the Hughes Aircraft Company (now Raytheon) in Tucson, Ariz. The family moved, sight-unseen, to Tucson in 1958. “We were piled into an un-air conditioned station wagon in August and drove from Norfolk, Va., to our new home in the desert. I simply fell in love with the west and the outdoors as a young girl. I loved horseback riding, hiking, and building forts in the desert with my brother Michael, who is an attorney in Denver. Later, my father taught us to ski. My mother opened our eyes to the world through our travels to Italy as children to visit my grandparents.”

Judge Jorgenson graduated from the University of Arizona College of Law in 1977. She enjoys acting as a moot court judge for law school competitions and mentoring law students assigned as externs to her chambers. An avid Wildcat football and basketball fan, she and her dad have had season football tickets for more than 30 years.

Judge Jorgenson began her legal career prosecuting sex crimes at the Pima County Attorney’s Office (PCAO) in Tucson in 1977. “I enjoyed being in the sex crimes division because prosecutors were on call and became aware of the investigation early on. We would go out to the scene. I learned how crime scenes were processed and evidence collected, such as fingerprints,” Judge Jorgenson recalls. It was during one of these investigations that she met a Tucson Police Department Detective named Don, who later became her husband. The Jorgensons have a blended family: Andrew, a law enforcement officer with the New Mexico State Police; Tyler, a Marine Corps veteran and architect in New York City; Donald, a law enforcement officer with the Tucson Police Department; Kellie, a homemaker in Missouri; and three grandchildren.

Prosecuting sex crimes at the PCAO quickly brought Judge Jorgenson several high-profile cases. “We had several rape cases with multiple victims. This was before DNA testing, so we had to use other evidence to prosecute these cases.” These were challenging cases, but Judge Jorgenson enjoyed the opportunity, as well as her work on some innovative solutions to help protect victims. One such solution concerned legislation for child victims. Because Arizona law was still developing in many areas in the ‘80s, cases involving child abuse were relatively uncharted. “We worked with the Arizona legislature to create child abuse laws,” Jorgenson said.

Judge Jorgenson and her PCAO colleagues also worked to develop rape shield laws. At the time, rape victims could be cross examined at length about their personal sexual history. But through these efforts, the case law was developed to protect these victims. This success was important, given society’s sometimes callous attitude toward rape

victims. Judge Jorgenson recalls, “As a young prosecutor I was delivering a closing argument in a case where the defendant had picked up the victim, a hitchhiker, and beat and brutally raped her. Suddenly one juror yelled out, ‘But she went with him!’ The other jurors glared at him. At least his comment gave me a chance to address his remark.”

When Judge Jorgenson started as a prosecutor, female lawyers were a growing minority. “Our class was about 20 to 25 percent women when I graduated. It seems that government offices were most receptive to women at that time, and I never felt held back because of my gender. There were experienced female attorneys at the PCAO when I arrived who handled the most serious cases alongside their male colleagues.” These women included Judge Jorgenson’s supervisor, Elizabeth Peasley-Fimbres, head of the Sex Crimes Division, whom she remembers as a strong leader. “She was very thorough and had good judgment in a position of power. She worked well with both opposing counsel and law enforcement and was an excellent trial attorney,” said Judge Jorgenson.

At the PCAO, along with good leaders, Judge Jorgenson found friends and colleagues, including some who would follow a similar professional path. “One of my mentors there was John Roll. His was the very first trial I observed as a new prosecutor. He had great communication skills and was incredibly well-prepared. John was one of the best trial attorneys in Tucson,” Jorgenson said. The two were colleagues at the PCAO for five years and later served together on the federal bench in Arizona for nearly 10 years until Judge Roll’s death in 2011.

Many of the professional relationships in the Tucson District Court have a long history. Chief Judge Raner C. Collins, a longtime colleague with Judge Jorgenson on the federal bench and former prosecutor with her at the PCAO, even presided over a case or two that she prosecuted in Superior Court. Judge Collins recalls, “She was a hard-working, tough prosecutor—no fuss, no muss.” Likewise, current U.S. Attorney Leonardo and Judge Jorgenson have long professional ties: “I have worked with Judge Jorgenson for more than 25 years. We first worked together as assistant U.S. attorneys and then as Pima County Superior Court Judges. The primary characteristic that I associate with Judge Jorgenson is her friendliness toward everyone. She is unfailingly kind and gracious with everyone she meets. This trait has served her well both as a lawyer and as a judge,” Leonardo said.

Before joining the judiciary, though, Judge Jorgenson spent about 10 years as an assistant U.S. attorney. “By the time I started at the U.S. Attorney’s Office I had done more than 50 jury trials. I was offered the job by Senior District Court Judge Stephen McNamee, who was the U.S. attorney for Arizona at the time. I enjoyed the work in that office, including a wide variety of criminal and civil cases.”

From the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Judge Jorgenson applied for a judgeship with Pima County Superior Court. Though her background was based in criminal and civil law, she spent four years on the family law bench, becoming its presiding judge. “On the family law bench, you could see

the incredible impact of the judicial system on families. Some of the cases were very difficult. Child custody decisions had to be made in some cases where no matter how the issues were decided, the children were going to be negatively affected," she recalls.

In family law cases, mediation was an excellent tool. "We were fortunate to have volunteer lawyers from the family law bar, who would often help resolve cases before trial. Serving as a judge in family matters was a completely different experience from criminal law and civil litigation, and presented unique challenges. For example, many people represented themselves. "The process for pro se individuals has improved considerably. People trying to handle their own cases can be chaotic. A self-help center and the creation of forms for litigants helped to smooth out the process," she remembers.

Judge Jorgenson began her career as a federal judge in March 2002, after she was appointed by President George W. Bush. Judge Jorgenson recalls fondly Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's personal tour of the Supreme Court with her family after her Senate confirmation hearing. She describes Justice O'Connor as a remarkable pioneer in the legal field, yet so gracious and kind to everyone she meets. Senior District Court Judge McNamee was the chief judge during Judge Jorgenson's federal appointment. "Steve was a wonderful chief. He gave new judges time to become familiar with the job before assigning us cases. He also passed on great case management tips." Judge Jorgenson was a member of the Criminal Law Committee to the Judicial Conference from 2006 to 2012. "This was a great opportunity to meet judges from all over the country and work on issues together on a national level."

As with her conscious efforts to hear the parties, Judge Jorgenson makes a concerted effort to involve jurors in the judicial process. "I've always allowed jurors to ask questions. The question is written out and discussed with the lawyers before it is asked. I believe it helps jurors to become more active listeners. I meet with all jurors after trial, and they like the idea. I've been doing this since I was an Arizona state court judge where it is required. The parties have always stipulated to this practice in federal court."

Those familiar with Arizona's federal courts know that Tucson's proximity to the Mexican border features choice

routes for aliens and narcotics, which keeps Tucson among the busiest jurisdictions in the nation. Judge Jorgenson and her colleagues have carried caseloads of more than 1,200 criminal cases per judge. The problem became especially pronounced after Chief Judge Roll's death in 2011. "After John's death, we began to bring in many visiting judges. So many wonderful colleagues from all over the country came to help out but this is not a permanent solution. We now have six judicial vacancies waiting to be filled in Arizona. The political process should respond more quickly to judicial vacancies. The vacancies are real and directly affect the court, staff, and litigants. Fortunately, we have an extremely hard-working group of judges here and a very congenial bench."

Those acquainted with the District of Arizona know that the lawyers and court staff work hard to maintain collegial relationships, a necessity given the strain of the case volume. In managing such a heavy docket, Judge Jorgenson credits her excellent staff, especially Judicial Assistant Penny Bradford and Law Clerk Elizabeth Jarecki, whom have both served with Judge Jorgenson for more than 15 years.

Anyone who has interacted with Judge Jorgenson understands that one of her gifts is addressing issues, not making things about herself. This approach stands out in a profession that can involve big egos, and is something widely appreciated. "When she does something, it's never about her; it's about getting the just result, doing the hard work that has to be done, or confronting the problem that needs to be solved. She notices the efforts of others and ensures their recognition," said Judge Zipps.

Judge Jorgenson enjoys spending time with her family. Ski trips to Colorado with her brother Mike and his family are a favorite vacation. She enjoys traveling and golfing with her husband, Don. A professional golfer for a time after his law enforcement career, he gives Judge Jorgenson hope that her golf game can be improved with more practice and focus. She also plays tennis and competes on a team. Her tennis friends are like a second family.

Asked what she would advise the upcoming generation of young lawyers and law students, Judge Jorgenson says, "Find work you really enjoy and are passionate about. More importantly, live all you can." ☺