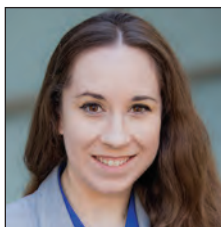




Hon. Allison H. Goddard

U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District of California

by Hana M. Willard



Hana M. Willard has served as a federal judicial law clerk for the Honorable Allison H. Goddard in the Southern District of California for over five years. Before clerking, Hana graduated magna cum laude from California Western School of Law in 2019, where she served as Editor-In-Chief of the California Western Law Review.

After nearly twenty years as a litigator, on August 1, 2019, the Honorable Allison H. Goddard was sworn in as a United States Magistrate Judge. I have worked as her judicial law clerk ever since, and such a routine first sentence does not give you a glimpse into who Judge Goddard is. So instead, I will start with this—the Judge Goddard I know is:

- “caring, thoughtful, and human,” according to her husband;
- “generous, diligent, and steadfast,” according to her brother;
- “tireless, dependable, and loyal,” according to her best friend; and
- “brilliant, hilarious, and humble,” according to a judicial colleague.

When I interviewed her for this article, Judge Goddard never name-dropped a single one of her newsworthy cases or bragged about her many accomplishments. Instead, she spoke about the experiences that have shaped her and the people who paved the way for her. She did not mention that she received Consumer Attorneys of San Diego’s Outstanding Trial Lawyer Award. She also did not mention that she was a lead attorney representing more than 80 women in a lawsuit against a local hospital which alleged that its staff secretly recorded women during labor and delivery procedures. And she did not mention that she was part of the team that won a five-week trial against San Diego State University regarding the firing of women’s basketball coach Beth Burns. I Googled those things about her, and you can too.

What this article will do, I hope, is show you more than just her accolades and introduce you to the Judge Goddard I work with every day—a person who is kind, thoughtful, and wholeheartedly believes in people and in the legal system.

Background

Judge Goddard grew up in Nashville, Tennessee. With five siblings and 90 first cousins, she had “a little crazy but very fun” childhood, surrounded by family. She



credits her brothers with shaping her younger self into a future lawyer: “I learned how to argue from growing up with four brothers. I always had a sense of standing up for what I believed was right and fair.” She would also “argue incessantly” with her parents “when I felt like I had a just cause.”

After graduating from Boston College in 1993 with a major in political science and a minor in Russian and Eastern European studies, Judge Goddard pursued a master’s degree in political science from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville with the plan of becoming a college professor. After spending one year there, she pursued other opportunities and is not ashamed to label herself a drop out. During a visit to San Diego, her college boyfriend proposed at the airport: “he was so excited to get engaged that he couldn’t wait to get out of the airport parking lot.” They have been happily married for 29 years and have two children.

Judge Goddard did not come to San Diego with the goal of becoming a lawyer. However, the two jobs she held after moving here led her to law school. After moving to San Diego with her husband, Judge Goddard first worked as a receptionist at a development company. Little did she know that this job would be her “first taste of the law” because the development company was sued constantly in small claims court. This afforded

Judge Goddard the opportunity to become the company's *de facto* litigation coordinator as she represented the company in approximately 30 small claims actions.

Another fortuitous aspect of working for the development company was meeting Judge Gordon Thompson, Jr., a U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of California, who was friends with her boss and who ultimately became a mentor. She recalls that "he was one of the first people I told when I said, 'I think I want to go to law school,' and he was very encouraging." Judge Goddard is a first-generation lawyer, so Judge Thompson's encouragement meant a lot to her.

Next, she worked for a startup phone company doing contract administration and tariff management. She worked with many lawyers in her role, and again began to feel that she should pursue the legal profession. "I felt very patronized. . . . The lawyers [seemed to say] 'oh that's so cute, she wants to know why this provision is in the contract.' And I just thought, 'I can do what you do.' So I decided to go to law school."

Upon deciding to apply to law school, Judge Goddard began to have second thoughts. Though she was interested in pursuing a legal career, she was not sure if she could balance it with having a family. Fortunately, Justice Judith L. Haller, an Associate Justice of the Fourth District California Court of Appeal, had a son who interned at the phone company. During a dinner, "I just zeroed in [on his mother being on the Court of Appeal] and asked him a hundred questions. I said, and I'm sure he thought it was bizarre, 'Do you feel like she loved you? Do you feel like she was a good mom? Do you want to write a book about her in a bad way? Did you feel like you were supported and loved growing up, or did she work a lot?' And his response was so great, he said, 'Yes, she worked a lot, but she always picked up the phone when we called. And so I knew that even if she wasn't at home, she was there for me.' And that made a huge difference to me: gosh if Justice Haller can do it, I can do it." That sealed the deal for Judge Goddard—she was now confident that she could do both things, have a family and be a successful attorney.

Legal Career

Judge Goddard graduated from University of San Diego Law School in 2000, ranked number two in her class. During law school, she externed for Judge Rudi M. Brewster, a U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of California, and absolutely "loved it, it was amazing." She recommends that law students apply for externships, recalling that she "learned a lot about how the court worked and I got to watch smart lawyers in the courtroom. I got to have a sense of the reverence and respect people have for this court."

After law school, Judge Goddard took an associate position at a large international law firm, focusing her practice on corporate defense and class action defense. She is very grateful to the two partners she worked for, who gave her "free range to manage cases." She "learned so much," especially from the edits to her written work,



Judge Goddard and her children in 2019, after her California Supreme Court oral argument.

which she credits for making her a better writer today. "Some days I felt like I was swimming without a net, but it was the perfect way to teach me how to practice law."

After having her first child, she thought, "if I'm going to spend time away from my children, I want it to be doing something that I feel like is making me a better lawyer." She "wanted experience. You can't be a good litigator without getting some experience in court. I wanted that opportunity, so I had to make it." She then opened her own law firm with a friend, focusing on smaller corporate defense cases and patent cases. She and her friend handled every deposition and every trial, which she found "much more satisfying than document review."

The great recession of 2010 impacted her law firm, and the work eventually dried up. At the same time, her husband switched careers and was pursuing a teaching credential program. Judge Goddard found herself at a crossroads, and a fortuitous offer from her best friend led her to join a plaintiff-side class action practice. At this smaller firm, she picked her own cases and only selected those she believed in. Though the change was precipitated by necessity, not choice, she found the work incredibly fulfilling: "The happiest I've been and the cases that have been the most fulfilling are when I have felt like I was a megaphone for people who didn't have a voice in the system. That's why I wanted to be a lawyer. I love a sense of justice and fairness and being part of a system where that is the promise."

Judge Goddard's favorite part of being an attorney was meeting people. Though she spent 90% of her time telling people they did not have a case, "I could tell that I had made a difference by just listening to them and giving them respect and I like that feeling that I was building confidence in the legal system."

Judge Goddard always thought becoming a judge sounded interesting, and in 2018, she finally felt like she had enough experience to apply. She thought being a judge would be a great way to utilize the experience she



Top Left: Judge Goddard, her courtroom deputy, and law clerks, having dinner and going to the symphony in 2022. Top right: (picture 6 caption) In 2022, after being sentenced to time served, a former defendant wanted to thank Judge Goddard for giving him a chance and for believing in him. Bottom: Judge Goddard, her husband, and children in Bali in 2022.

had gained and to work in public service. Though Judge Goddard never practiced criminal law, she was fascinated by it, so she solely applied to the federal bench because federal judges handle both civil and criminal cases. Though she did not get selected on her first try, she did not give up; she applied again and was selected as a Magistrate Judge in 2019.

When asked about being a judge, she gushed, “I love every part of it.” Her days as a judge are “busy but fun.” Her favorite thing about being a judge is the diversity of all her cases and that “every day is different. You can never be bored in this job.” She also noted that, “I am so supported in a way I never have been supported in any of my careers before.” Before becoming a judge, she was accustomed to doing her own filing on CM/ECF and knew how many megabytes each motion attachment could be; she initially found it “overwhelming to be supported by smart people. I was nervous at first because I’m not a very good delegator, but that became very easy.”

Now that she is a judge, she does not miss being an attorney and advocate. She did, however, concede that “if I could go back in a time machine and do one thing, I would go back to trial. Because trial is not nearly as fun as a judge as it is as a lawyer.”

Commitment to Public Service

Judge Goddard has served as the mock trial coach for Waldorf High School for the past eight years. “I just love it. I started doing it when I was a lawyer, I had no business taking on anything else. I had done a presentation at the school in connection with the 9th Circuit essay contest and I got such a burst of energy from working with the students that I just realized it would be a great thing to bring to them. And then, it’s like when you rescue a dog: who rescued whom? I feel like I get more out of it than the students. When you see how much better they are at the end than they were at the beginning, and how much confidence they have, it’s just awesome.”

Judge Goddard has served as an associate in the Welsh Inn of Court, a barrister in the Wallace Inn of Court, and has been a master in the Welsh Inn of Court since 2017. “I really enjoy it. I love to learn. I’m a life-

long learner. You get that opportunity [to learn]. But you also get to meet a lot of people in the community. It makes you feel like you’re part of a profession, which I think is very important.” Judge Goddard has also been a member of the Southern District of California’s History Committee for the past seven years. “I’m a big fan of history and I think it’s really important that we have a record of the important people and events in our district. And I like learning, and talking to other judges, interviewing them, and finding out about what the district was like when they first came on the bench.”

Judge Goddard credits the San Diego Chapter of the Federal Bar Association as being “one of best things about my legal career.” She joined the FBA as a brand-new lawyer, held newsletter and membership leadership positions, and served as chapter president in 2009. She even assisted in bringing the FBA national convention to San Diego in 2012. “Seeing the FBA grow and knowing I was part in it is a huge source of pride for me.”

She considers joining the FBA a necessity for young lawyers: “you absolutely have to do it. You’re in a career, not just a job. You need to be thinking long term. You have to make time to do things like that. You will definitely elevate your practice because you will be listening to and learning about what judges prefer.” For young attorneys apprehensive about joining an organization like the FBA: “You don’t have to do everything. Pick one thing and do it really well. Be reliable, serve on committees, go to events. When you start going to an event, like a mixer, it’s so hard because you don’t know people. But then the next time it’s a little bit easier. And the next time it’s a little bit easier. And five or six times in, you feel like you’re going to a family reunion. That’s how the FBA has been for me.”

Words of Wisdom

Judge Goddard’s grandfather had fifteen children and worked as a salesperson in a men’s clothing store in Tennessee. One day, he borrowed money from his life insurance policy and started his own men’s clothing store, which turned out to be extremely successful. When she decided to start her own law firm, Judge Goddard’s son was five months old: “it was scary. And I thought, ‘what made my grandfather do that?’ He believed in himself. So don’t count yourself out. When you decide to go out on your own, you’re making a bet on yourself. When I framed it in that way, it made me go, ‘it’s a lot safer than betting on anyone else.’” ☺