

In Profile: Barbara LaWall...Pima County's Social Conscience

Beginning each day with the newspaper is perhaps the best litmus test Pima County Barbara LaWall can perform to see how her day will play out. The fact that each day is as unpredictable as the next seems to really suit her personality. She is a high-energy, socially conscious person with a passion for identifying and addressing juvenile issues in her community.

Perhaps that driving force and emphasis was formed well before her days as a prosecutor when she taught high school English in the early 1970s. In fact, it was her interest and intention to attend law school so that she could become active in developing education policy and reform in the state.

It's been said that life is what happens to you while you are busy making plans... and that's exactly what happened to County Attorney LaWall. She had to abandon her idea of returning to teaching because she needed a job to finish law school. The only place hiring at that time was the Pima County Attorney's Office. She started her career at the PCAO as a law clerk.

Nearly 26 years later--steadily moving through the ranks--Barbara LaWall is Pima County's chief prosecutor and the first woman to be elected into the office. She took office in 1997 and loves the job. LaWall feels she makes a difference in her community by continuing to implement innovative programs that address everything from issues of truancy to safe baby programs and from gun education to student anti-drinking curriculums.

On the day we meet, she had just wrapped up a teaching session with new prosecutors as an Arizona Prosecuting Attorneys' Advisory Council meeting in Scottsdale. "I try to explain to new prosecutors that they have an enormous responsibility to do the right thing for the right reason...and that the job is never just about racking up convictions," she said. "Prosecutors have immense power-- if we are not fair and just--we can ruin people. We must always seek justice."

LaWall is a firm believer that modern day prosecutors can't just be case processors. "Prosecutors must be creative problem solvers and think outside the box," she explained. A good example of thinking outside the box was the program she initiated after a rash of unwanted babies were found dead in Arizona dumpsters in the late 1990s.

"The Safe Baby program provides immunity from prosecution and allows frightened young mothers to leave an unwanted child in the care of hospital practitioners instead of abandoning the child," LaWall said. The Arizona Legislature used the program's procedures and guidelines to implement statewide legislation in May 2001.

Responsible for a staff of approximately 300 and serving a county with a population of nearly 900,000, County Attorney LaWall's days are hectic and fast-paced--just the way she likes them. Often at the end of a busy day she goes home and cooks... to relax. Most people look upon cooking as a chore, but LaWall finds it therapeutic. "I love to cook, because I can think of the task at hand, focus and forget about everything except cooking for a while," she explained.

She loves to cook so much that she has taken cooking classes to perfect her favorite past time. Curious about what she considers her favorite cooking endeavor, the question had to be asked...she says she makes "scones to die for." Beyond cooking, LaWall also finds time to read, go to the movies and travel.

In fact, she and her daughter return from a trip to London and Paris in September. A little business and a little pleasure... in London LaWall attended the International Prosecutors Conference that allowed her to interact and discuss rules of law with prosecutors from all over the world. "I found the experience and information interesting, but I'm thankful for our system," she said.

"My daughter and I had to cut our trip short after two days in Paris because my son-in-law, who lives in Los Angeles, was an unintentional victim of a drive-by shooting. Fortunately, he was not hit by the gun fire, but his car was riddled with bullet holes," she explained. "My daughter and I immediately got on a plane for home when we heard the news," she added.

Although born in New York, LaWall has lived her entire life in Tucson. She considers herself a native and attended local Tucson schools including the University of Arizona for her law degree.

LaWall is the immediate past-Chair of the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission and served in that role from 1998 to 2000. She continues to serve the criminal justice community as a Commissioner and as a member of the Crime Victims Committee of the ACJC. ○