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STACEY A.
KARTCHNER
2024 SDCBA PRESIDENT



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2024 SDCBA PRESIDENT

By Karen Korr



In addition to “2024 San Diego County Bar Association President,” there are several titles you can use to describe Stacey Kartchner. She is a tenacious litigator. She is a devoted mother. She is a dedicated leader. However, the most appropriate title for Stacey may be “warrior.”

Colleagues, friends, and family describe Stacey as an outstanding attorney and a woman who is unequivocally ambitious, compassionate, tactical, determined, and hard-working. Her ascension to the SDCBA presidency represents a significant milestone in her life story, which she has only recently begun to feel comfortable sharing.

Stacey’s story will have a happy ending, but it is far from a fairytale. Born and raised in Salt Lake City, Stacey’s parents divorced while she was still in kindergarten, leaving Stacey and her older sister Karen splitting time between two households and being raised by their mother during the week and their father on weekends. Their mother, Sherry, while struggling financially, moved the girls to a nicer neighborhood where she could ensure they would receive a good, public-school education. Sherry was a caring and nurturing mother, but a few years following her divorce, she became romantically involved with a man who was an alcoholic and who often would become physically abusive.

As a result, Stacey was removed from the household and went to live with her father, Lynn, and her paternal grandparents, who helped raise her while her father worked long hours. After several years, Stacey missed her sister and her friends, and she moved back in with her mother, where the family’s domestic struggles persisted.

To shield the girls from abuse, they were moved to a shared bedroom in the basement. For their own self-protection, they devised a system for when they heard their mother’s body hit the floor upstairs and the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the stairwell toward their bedroom. Karen would block the door with a baseball bat in hand, while Stacey crawled through the downstairs window and ran to the neighbors to call the police. The girls’ efforts, unfortunately, were for naught, as the abuse was taking place long before the Violence Against Women Act was enacted, so Stacey and Karen would summon the police only for the officers to wait for the abuser to “calm down” and then leave.

Karen believes Stacey’s consummate positivity, mental fortitude, and warrior mindset is what got the girls through the tough times and the many nights over the years



when they would go to bed not knowing if they, or their mother, would make it through the night. Stacey believes her past experience is what continues to guide her in her personal and professional endeavors today. She credits her early hardships for making her a stronger and more compassionate attorney and advocate, noting that it helps her relate to and sympathize with her clients.

“Most of my clients come from families on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, and often grew up in a home environment where physical abuse or substance abuse, and often both, were prevalent,” she said. “My background helps me relate to my clients and to see the good in them. They know my empathy is genuine, which allows them to open up to me, and that gives me the opportunity to truly support them by gathering mitigation evidence and helping them make meaningful change.”

She added, “It was Judge Renée Stackhouse, also a former SDCBA President, who encouraged me to share my backstory openly, as a way to empower others who may question their suitability for a leadership role.”

Her sister Karen agrees that Stacey’s background has shaped who she is today, and that her buoyant spirit helps her elevate those around her.

“Dealing with challenges and adversity is something that Stacey has done her whole life,” said Karen. “However, she meets those challenges head on and finds a way to be better because of it. Stacey knows who she is and what she is capable of and isn’t content to stagnate. She is always trying to improve herself and be a better human being. And she brings others up with her. She has a way of making people smile and brightening their day. Sometimes I think she is trying to make the world a better place one smile at a time.”

Hard work and perseverance are ingrained in Stacey’s character, and she has never shied away from a challenge or putting in the “sweat equity” needed to get what she wants. Stacey recalls a time in middle school when she really wanted a pair of expensive Guess-brand jeans also donned by her wealthier middle school friends. At the time, her mother could only afford to spend \$100 per year on school clothes at discount stores like K-mart and Mervyn’s. Stacey knew she needed to find a job to buy the clothes she wanted and stop having to recycle the same outfits every few days.

She scoured her neighborhood for the biggest house around, knocked on the door, and asked the owner if she could mow the lawn. The owner agreed, and after seeing Stacey’s strong work ethic, she hired Stacey to do landscaping and household chores as well. Gloria Russo, the homeowner, also owned a catering company, so Stacey was often asked to help with polishing silverware and other tasks for the company. From the ages of 11 to 16 (the legal age to get a job in Utah), Stacey worked at Gloria’s house for eight hours every Saturday, and sometimes after school when there was a catering job.

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— KAREN KARTCHNER
SISTER

When she was not working or going to school, Stacey was competing. Her father, Lynn, describes Stacey as a very gifted athlete, who ran track, and played competitive basketball, volleyball and soccer, serving as the captain of her high school soccer team. “Growing up, Stacey did not have it easy and did whatever it took to achieve her goals. She started working at a young age, and always had at least one job,” said Stacey’s father, Lynn. “Stacey is the type of person that, when she wants something, she will overcome whatever obstacle she has to in order to get it. Nothing was ever handed to Stacey. She had to work hard to get where she is today.”

In high school, Stacey held several jobs so she could afford her clothes, car, car insurance, and all that goes along with busy teenage social life. She moved in with Gloria for six months during her sophomore year of high school, when things were particularly difficult at home. Following her high school graduation, Stacey found her own apartment and began working full-time during the day to pay rent and get health insurance, and at night, she worked at a fine dining restaurant.

Serendipitously, it was Gloria who provided the connections for Stacey to get to where she is today. As it so happened, Gloria had worked as a Clerk for a District Court Judge for 25 years. When Stacey was 19 years-old, Gloria encouraged Stacey to participate in a legal secretary course she taught at a local community college and pursue a career, rather than spend her life juggling multiple jobs.

"I didn't know any lawyers. A career in the legal profession never even crossed my mind," said Stacey. "I had it easier than a lot of my friends because the only expectation that my parents had of me was that I always remain independent and able to walk away from a bad situation if I needed to. I come from a military family with both of my grandfathers and my father having served in the U.S. Army, enlisting at a young age. My mom had a tough upbringing and had to drop out of high school at age 16 to work at a bakery to help support her four younger siblings. Consequently, no one in my family had ever attended college. Needless to say, my parents were thrilled when I enrolled in college to get a Legal Secretary Certificate."

Her interest in the legal profession was truly ignited when she secured a receptionist position, with Gloria's help, at the best criminal defense firm in Salt Lake City at the time, Athay & DeLand. At the end of her shift, she would either head to night school at the community college or to work at the restaurant to earn the money she needed to pay her college tuition.

Attorney Loni DeLand represented a defendant, Elroy Tillman, in a high-profile death penalty case at the time. Every day, Elroy would tell the guards that he needed to call his lawyer's office and he and Stacey would chat.

"I have a very vivid memory of thinking 'I need to be a lawyer so I can free this man from death row,'" said Stacey. "I got to know Elroy as a person, and wanted to make sure there was no miscarriage of justice in his case. I understood in that moment the power lawyers have to help people, and I realized I needed to earn my law degree in a hurry before he got executed." Incidentally, in 2005, DeLand was able to get Elroy, who had spent 22 years on death row, resentenced to 5-years-to-life in prison after the Utah Supreme Court found that prosecutors had withheld evidence from his lawyers.

Gil Athay, the firm's other named partner, served as a mentor and role model for Stacey. Recognizing Stacey's newfound passion, Gil encouraged Stacey to finish her undergraduate studies and apply to law school.

"Stacey is among the elite in her commitment to the fundamental principles of equality and justice for all. She is an exemplary human being with the brain power, personality and heart necessary to succeed in any setting," said Gil, who Stacey still considers a mentor to this day.

After earning an associate degree from Salt Lake Community College, Stacey transferred to the University of Utah, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science. By then, she was working full-time for the Utah State Bar, Office of Attorney Discipline, and still working at the restaurant in the evenings when she was not in school. When Stacey was a child, her father had taken her to San Diego on vacation several times, and so she decided to attend California Western School of Law, in part because the school offered a two-year criminal law program, as well as a part-time option she could enroll in if she was able to find work while pursuing her law degree.

As luck would have it, Gil Athay had represented J. David Dominelli in a high-profile case in San Diego in the mid-80s, and attorneys Robert (Bob) Grimes and Thomas (Tom) Warwick had served as local counsel. Gil asked if they needed any help at their firm, Grimes & Warwick, since Stacey was seeking employment for the hours when she wasn't in school or studying. Tom called her in for an interview and she was hired that afternoon as the firm's office manager and as a legal secretary. She remained employed with the firm all through law school.

"I have had the great pleasure of watching Stacey progress over the last few decades from a paralegal to a law student to a lawyer, and now to the County Bar president. I am very proud of her journey, and I know she will be a dedicated and conscientious president," said Bob.

Stacey was hired at Grimes & Warwick as an associate after graduating and passing the bar, and Tom took her under his wing and taught her how to be a great lawyer. They complemented one another and worked side by side for exactly ten years before Stacey went out on her own as a solo practitioner. "I was very happy and comfortable practicing at Grimes & Warwick, but knew I needed to leave the nest in order to grow," Stacey shared. "I decided to leave on my 10-year work anniversary and provided Tom with six weeks' notice so I could assist in finding my replacement. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Tom and Bob for all they taught me, for their continued support of me and my practice through their advice and referrals, and for creating opportunities to work together on cases for over 20 years. They are like family to me."

The mutual admiration, love, and respect between Stacey and the Grimes & Warwick partners is evident to anyone who knows them, and while they practice separately, they are still very much part of the same team. Through their time working together, Tom and Stacey developed a particularly close partnership and friendship, and the two lawyers formed a highly successful team, with Tom being the “mover and shaker” of the duo, allowing Stacey to focus on client communications and writing – her strong suit. It is no surprise to Tom that Stacey’s career took off and that she continues to soar.

“Stacey could do anything and do it well. In her spare time, she also ran the Criminal Defense Bar Association and the Criminal Defense Lawyers Club as executive director,” Tom noted. “If you wanted something done, wanted it done right and wanted it done on time you’d just have Stacey do it. She has always been a model of efficiency and thoroughness. I cannot say enough about what Stacey has done and will do in the future. It has been a joy to watch her develop and progress as an attorney and as a leader.”

Stacey credits Tom for teaching her some of the lessons that shape her as both a lawyer and a volunteer leader.

“Tom is an incredible lawyer, and he was an outstanding mentor. He taught me to really see the individual we were representing in tough criminal cases and how their life was about more than the few moments they would be judged on,” said Stacey. “There are two lessons in particular that I learned from Tom that continue to guide my career — always be proactive and not reactive. And never take no for an answer.”

In 2004, Tom served as the SDCBA President, and Stacey recalls how tirelessly he worked on behalf of the legal community and the greater San Diego community at large. Stacey’s father and paternal grandparents had taught her the importance of serving one’s country, volunteerism, and giving back, and her family’s altruism, coupled with Tom’s leadership, inspired Stacey to get more involved in San Diego’s legal community as her career evolved.

“I have been really fortunate in my life, and I have been given so many gifts. There have been many people throughout my life and my career who have championed and supported me on my journey. My sister, in particular, has always been so protective of me and sacrificed everything so I could be successful and happy. I’m also very proud to come from a military family, and to have a father who taught me so many life lessons, the most important being integrity and always keeping your commitments.



Hon. Victor Torres, Glory Rascon, Stacey A. Kartchner, Tom Warwick

I’m also very grateful to the San Diego legal community that is so collaborative and service oriented. I truly appreciate having the opportunity to give back to a community that I love so much,” said Stacey.

San Diego Superior Court Judge Victor Torres, who worked in the office next door to Stacey at Grimes & Warwick, has long known Stacey both as an attorney and in her myriad volunteer leadership roles. He has seen her work assiduously to get to where she is today.

“I worked with Stacey when she was an Associate at Grimes & Warwick, where I was Of Counsel. She was a valued colleague back then as well as when she was a CJA Panel attorney. Stacey’s dedication to her clients first, regardless of whether she was retained or appointed by the court, was remarkable,” said Judge Torres. “As a Bar leader she leads by giving of herself first and foremost. You can’t ask for more than that from a Bar President.” In addition to her SDCBA leadership, Stacey has served as the President of the Criminal Defense Lawyer’s Club, President of the Criminal Defense Bar Association, Chair of the Criminal Justice Attorneys (CJA) Material

Witness Advisory Committee, and Chair of the San Diego Criminal Justice Memorial Committee, in addition to serving on a variety of highly visible committees and task forces. She is also very passionate about microcredit, and has served on the Board of Directors of Accessity (formerly ACCION) since 2011, as well as the organization's Secretary from 2019-2022.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Stacey's leadership was critical as she acted as a liaison between the District Attorney's office, Public Defender's Office, Sheriff's Department, the courts, and the private criminal bar. She was an integral part of the team that figured out the logistics that would allow critical court operations to proceed.

"Stacey Kartchner is a phenomenal leader who stepped up during a time of unprecedented challenges with the impact of COVID on our justice system," said Summer Stephan, San Diego County District Attorney. "Her focus on collaboration and transparent communication positively contributed to our county's ability to preserve the due process rights of defendants and crime victims. There's no doubt Stacey will bring her consummate professionalism and forward-thinking style to enhance the bar association for all."

San Diego Superior Court Judge Michael Smyth, who was the Presiding Judge at that time, expressed his gratitude for Stacey's service during the pandemic, saying, "Shortly after beginning my term as Assistant Presiding Judge we were hit with the pandemic and the resulting closure of the court. Stacey, at the time president of the San Diego Criminal Defense Lawyers Club, was a crucial justice partner as we developed processes for handling the countless pending criminal cases, including thousands of incarcerated defendants. Her input was invaluable, as was her ability to communicate with and seek input from the criminal bar. Stacey's tireless work made these difficult times easier to manage, and I will always be grateful for that."

Other judges in San Diego County also sing Stacey's praises and are elated to see her in the role of SDCBA President. They commend her for her superior skills as a lawyer, her positive and sunny disposition, and her ability to lead enthusiastically, efficiently, and effectively.

The Honorable Dana M. Sabraw, Chief Judge, United States District Court, Southern District of California said, "Stacey will be an excellent SDCBA President. She is an excellent lawyer and seasoned leader, having chaired so many Bar and community related organizations.

"SHE IS A PEOPLE PERSON, RUNS QUICK AND EFFICIENT MEETINGS, GETS TO THE HEART OF IMPORTANT ISSUES — AND ALWAYS DOES SO WITH A RESPECTFUL, WARM AND PERSONABLE APPROACH. I AM DELIGHTED THAT STACEY WILL TAKE THE HELM OF THE SDCBA. OUR COMMUNITY COULDN'T BE IN BETTER HANDS."

— HON. DANA M. SABRAW
CHIEF JUDGE,
U.S. DISTRICT COURT,
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

I work closely with Stacey in her capacity as Chair of the CJA Material Witness Panel attorneys and Chair of the Criminal Justice Memorial Committee, both important groups that serve vital interests of the federal court. Stacey has a deep understanding of the needs of the Court and a knack for identifying issues and accomplishing what's best for our Court and community. She is a people person, runs quick and efficient meetings, gets to the heart of important issues — and always does so with a respectful, warm and personable approach. I am delighted that Stacey will take the helm of the SDCBA. Our community couldn't be in better hands."

In March of 2023, after nearly 15 years as a solo practitioner, Stacey joined Klinedinst PC, following another serendipitous moment — sitting next to Klinedinst Partner Earll Pott at a CLE program by chance. They discussed Stacey's upcoming presidency, and how joining forces could be beneficial for all parties.

"Stacey is one of the most talented, dedicated, and creative criminal defense lawyers I know. She has an almost unlimited capacity for empathy that balances well with a sharp pragmatism that comes from her long experience in the trenches. It's an absolute pleasure working with her, and the Bar is lucky to have her as president," Earll said.



Stepping Up to the Bar 2023



Photobooth fun with the SDCBA Internal Team

While Stacey’s dedication to the legal community is unwavering, her true passion and top priority is her family: her husband, Christopher, and their 10-year-old son, Jackson. There is nothing Stacey enjoys more than spending time with her family, taking family ski trips, and supporting Jackson at his games as a self-proclaimed “crazy soccer mom.”

“I feel so fortunate and lucky to be Jackson’s mom,” said Stacey. “He is funny, kind, smart, and empathetic, and raising him is truly the greatest joy of my life.”

According to Christopher, who owns a manufacturing business, Stacey is an extraordinary mother to Jackson despite constantly balancing multiple competing priorities. “No matter how busy her schedule is, her number one priority is our son. She is his biggest cheerleader! I am dazzled by her ability to expertly manage countless daily tasks, both at home and work, embodying the essence of the modern working mother. Seamlessly weaving a thriving career with the intricate demands of family life, she stands as a master juggler. Her unwavering dedication and relentless drive are a testament to how the fusion of love and ambition transcends boundaries, propelling her towards boundless success,” Christopher said.

Her family means the world to her, and she treasures the time she can spend back in Utah with both of her parents, her sister Karen, and her 35-year-old nephew Cassidy. She maintains a close circle of friends in Utah that she has had since kindergarten, and a plethora of friends in the San Diego legal community. They also agree that she will be a remarkable SDCBA President.

Fellow SDCBA Board Member Brenda Lopez praised Stacey for her ability to make things happen, saying, “During our service on the Board, I have seen Stacey run successfully to be Secretary and now incoming President.

Stacey worked hard to help create a criminal law section, the affinity bar, and the DEI Division. Stacey is someone who cares about others, wants to make this community better, and will dedicate time to get the job done!”

This sentiment is echoed by Stacey’s long-time friend, attorney Liz Missakian.

“In the 25-plus years I have known and worked with Stacey, she has consistently demonstrated a commitment to high ethical standards in the practice of law, powerful advocacy for her clients, and civility with co-counsel and the court,” said Liz. “If Stacey says she will take care of something, you can bet money that she will do it to completion, often with humor, and always with the goal of maintaining a strong bar. She will be a wonderful president of our county bar.”

As the SDCBA President, Stacey aims to be a champion for access to justice issues, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts, promote ethics, integrity, and professionalism in the practice of law, encourage mentorship and community service, and strengthen relations and collaboration between the SDCBA and specialty bar associations. If history is a true predictor of future events, it is safe to assume that Stacey will do just that — as well as anything else this warrior sets her mind to in her year as SDCBA President and beyond.



Karen Korr works with law firms and bar associations on communications strategy, content, and copy. She is the former Director of Communications for the San Diego County Bar Association, and has worked in the legal community locally, regionally, and nationally for the past two decades. For more information, please visit fullkorrpress.com or contact Karen via email at karen@fullkorrpress.com.