

DOROTHY FERNANDEZ

Pulling People Together and Making Connections

Leslie A. Gordon

Dorothy Fernandez spent years as a high-powered partner at one of the country's largest and most prestigious law firms. But she gave it all up to become . . . wait for it . . . a staff member at the very same firm. And she couldn't be happier.

Formerly a securities litigator at Morrison & Foerster, Fernandez is now pro bono counsel there, managing and promoting the participation of lawyers in the firm's legendary pro bono program.

Fernandez's transition from partner to staff member took place in 2013 after she'd spent one academic year working as an adjunct professor at two Bay Area law schools. The move back to Morrison & Foerster was "seamless," Fernandez recalls. "It wasn't awkward at all. It helped that I'd been at the firm a long time—since 1999. The partners were my friends and I knew a lot of associates. It's actually helpful in this role to have been a partner. Plus, Morrison & Foerster is an egalitarian place. There's no hierarchy."

Today, Fernandez has both an internal-facing role and an external-facing role, she explains. "Internally, I'm assigned to the firm's San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Denver offices. I find out what the attorneys there are passionate about and where they might need to build skills. It's really fun finding pro bono opportunities for them. In my external-facing role, I meet with nonprofits and public interest groups to learn about their needs and to see if

there's a way we can work together. I enjoy putting people together and making these connections."

Named by Law360 as a Pro Bono Firm of the Year for six straight years, Morrison & Foerster was one of the first law firms in the country to employ a full-time pro bono counsel and now has three firmwide. The firm opened 450 new pro bono matters and gave more than 97,000 hours of pro bono services in 2014. Rachel Williams is one of the staff members who shares the role with Fernandez, whom Williams describes as "an incredible colleague. She's a hard worker who doesn't seek the spotlight or glory. She's very nonassuming. So I'm thrilled you're writing this article about her."

Running a pro bono program is an intense administrative job, Williams explains. "You need to be a passionate advocate for the concept of access to justice. But we're also a law firm and can only sustain a pro bono program if it fits with a billable practice and if we take on issues people are passionate about. It requires a mix of passion and pragmatism and thinking creatively about using resources. Dorothy has the energy and the ability to jump in and pitch in."

At Morrison & Foerster, some attorneys prefer only to represent individuals in pro bono cases, whereas others want to work on broad impact litigation. Fernandez, Williams notes, has experience with both. A dedicated advocate for the LGBT community, Fernandez served as co-chair of the board of directors for the National Center for

photo by Jim Block



Lesbian Rights and served on the board of the Pride Law Fund, which provides scholarships to law students working on issues related to the equal rights of LGBT individuals and people living with HIV/AIDS. “As a longtime board member at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Dorothy has experience with impact litigation,” Williams says. “But she’s also ready to stand in at a monthly legal clinic for the homeless, where the clients are high need. They may have substance abuse or mental health issues. Dorothy is ready for any personality and willing to work with challenging clients. She’s also willing to pitch in and do things like sign people in at intakes.”

Mairi McKeever, director of the Pro Bono Legal Services Programs at the Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) of The

Bar Association of San Francisco, works with Fernandez with the Housing Negotiation Project helping clients with mandatory settlement conferences for people facing eviction. “Dorothy does a great job. If she can’t find enough volunteers, she steps in and takes on the client herself. She’s happy to be hands-on. She’s also a pleasure to work with. She’s a down-to-earth person and very calming,” McKeever says, adding that she’s impressed with how serious Fernandez is about the work. “She believes in law firms playing a role in access to justice. She walks the walk.”

Between leaving the Morrison & Foerster partnership and returning to the firm as pro bono counsel, Fernandez spent a year as an adjunct professor at Golden Gate University School of Law (GGU Law) teaching appellate

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advocacy and at Santa Clara University School of Law teaching “soft skills” in the classroom component to the law school’s externship program. “I left the firm because I wanted a change,” Fernandez explains about her initial switch from law firm partner to law school professor. “I fell into securities litigation and it turned out I was good at it, but it wasn’t really my passion. I hit a point in my career where I wanted to align my career with something I was more passionate about. It was hard to do soul searching while in a demanding job. So teaching was the perfect way to step back but still be involved in law. I was able to evaluate what I wanted from my career going forward.”

Rachel Van Cleave, dean of GGU Law, hired her as a professor. Fernandez, Van Cleave says, is “a delightful person. She had great experience and was great with students. She was accessible to them and open to giving them feedback and mentoring.”

Van Cleave has also worked with Fernandez on the Veterans Legal Resources Hub, also known as V-HUB. The outcome of the Veterans Summit hosted by BASF in early 2014, V-HUB is a consortium of legal service providers helping veterans with legal problems. Along with BASF’s Lawyer Referral and Information Service, which serves as the centralized entry point for veterans seeking legal services, JDC, GGU Law, the Legal Aid Society–Employment Law Center, Swords to Plowshares, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) support V-HUB. In recent years, it’s become one of Fernandez’s pro bono focuses.

Although her father is a World War II veteran, that wasn’t a motivating factor for Fernandez’s work with V-HUB. “It’s such a vulnerable population,” she explains. “There’s a great need. Only in the last few decades have people understood the trauma of war. We’ve been working with the bar and other organizations to coordinate services so veterans have a central place to reach out to. I’m always a fan of collaboration between private and public interests.” GGU Law’s Van Cleave, V-HUB’s cochair, says Fernandez’s “perspective and insight” are impressive. “She has an openness to finding ways to address these issues just because it’s the right thing to do,” Van Cleave says. “She’s

very warm, very thoughtful and has a good sense of humor. She may initially appear a little quiet, but that’s because she’s listening. She’s taking things in and figuring out where she can best contribute.” McKeever of JDC adds, “Dorothy will nudge you along to make sure everything stays on track. She’ll ask, ‘When are we going to have our next meeting?’”

Born in San Francisco, Fernandez was raised in a small town in Wyoming. “It was very rural, very working class,” she recalls. Her father, who was raised in Mexico, worked as a custodian, and her mother was a housewife. The second oldest of four kids, Fernandez graduated from Stanford University with a degree in psychology in 1992. She decided to apply to law school because she was interested in “using law to help people who were powerless.” After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1996, she joined the securities litigation team at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati. It was at Wilson Sonsini that she started her pro bono work, pitching in on a disability rights class action case. She joined Morrison & Foerster in 1999 and was elected partner in 2004. She handled complex litigation and was responsible for drafting key dispositive motions in some of the firm’s largest securities cases. Her own pro bono work focused on cases involving the rights of LGBT individuals and the treatment of children in foster care.

Today, when she’s not spearheading Morrison & Foerster’s pro bono efforts, Fernandez and her wife, Lisa, a humanities professor at San Jose State University, spend time with their two cats and enjoy walks with their pit bull, Fergus.

*A former lawyer, Leslie A. Gordon is a freelance journalist living in San Francisco. She is the author of *Cheer: A Novel and Heads or Tails*, both available on Amazon. She can be reached at leslie.gordon@stanfordalumni.org.*