

BACK STORY

RUTH COHEN, FROM JERSEY GIRL TO NEVADA LAWYER

BY JANE ANN MORRISON

Ruth Cohen abandoned New Jersey for Nevada because a friend told her there were more opportunities for young lawyers, especially women, in Las Vegas. That certainly turned out to be true for Cohen, who became one of the first 100 women admitted to the State Bar of Nevada.

The pretty, feisty 27-year-old with the raucous laugh arrived here in 1976 and, three months later, after passing the Nevada bar exam, she became the fourth woman ever hired in the Clark County District Attorney's office, headed, at the time, by George Holt.

In 1978, U.S. Attorney Mahlon Brown named her one of the first female federal prosecutors in Nevada's history, relying on a recommendation from Lawrence Leavitt, the man assigned to mentor her in the DA's office.

"I had confidence in her and it had nothing to do with her gender; she made a strong impression," says Leavitt, who was also with the U.S. attorney's office and is now a federal magistrate judge. "She was a brash young woman from New Jersey. She was a very quick study and she did not require extensive mentoring."

In both the DA's office and the U.S. attorney's office, Cohen was a zealous advocate. Nobody was going to push her around. "Ruth had a tough-guy New Jersey exterior but inside was quite soft and sensitive. That's why it was easy to look at her as an excellent prospect for the U.S. attorney's office," Leavitt recalled.

Cohen remembers that, on her first day as a federal prosecutor, the woman assigned as Cohen's legal assistant said she didn't know if it was going to work out, because she'd never had to work for a woman before. "I decided that rather than be a radical feminist as I had been in New Jersey, I thought it was best to shut up and do the job and gain people's trust that way," Cohen recalls. "And that's what I did."

Cohen says she wasn't treated as an equal when she first became a federal prosecutor. "I had to prove myself; the others did not have to," she explains. "I had to accept cases given to me, even if they were hand-me-downs from the guys, and I did it."

Cohen worked as a federal prosecutor for 29 years on both the criminal and civil sides. However, it was her criminal cases that grabbed the headlines. In



Photo by Beau Sterling

1978, she prosecuted Pahrump land developer Norman Dacus for violating federal land sales laws by making false claims to buyers. Folks in Pahrump are still waiting for that 20-acre lake Dacus promised would be coming.

Cohen's then-boss was quoted in a 1979 news story saying that the Dacus case was the most difficult and technical case his office had prosecuted up to that time. The headline read, "Ruth Cohen Proves Herself in the

Tough Ones." At the time that story was published, she had been a federal prosecutor for only 18 months.

Cohen also successfully prosecuted the Reverend Albert Dunn, an African-American minister and civil rights activist, for providing materials in a \$10 million counterfeit operation. In the mid-1980s, she successfully prosecuted brothers Terrance and Dennis Nikrasch in a massive slot scam running in Las Vegas between 1976 and 1979. Some \$10 million in slot jackpots had been rigged.

Cohen entered private practice after retiring from the U.S. Attorney's office in 2007. In January of this year, she opened a new law firm with former federal prosecutor, Paul Padda. The firm of Cohen & Padda focuses on personal injury, employment discrimination, sexual harassment, immigration and criminal defense. It's a rarity: one of very few law firms co-owned and operated by a woman and a minority.

Padda, whose parents immigrated from India in the 1960s, describes his new partner as very passionate about helping the underdog. "She sees injustice and she'll speak up," he says. "...and bless her for being that way."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jane Ann Morrison has previously authored profiles on Ruth Cohen's career for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. She added to her previous work for *Nevada Lawyer* magazine. ■



JANE ANN MORRISON has worked for newspapers since 1971. Publications she has written for include the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Southwest Times Record*, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and the *Reno Gazette-Journal*. She became the first female general interest columnist for the *Review-Journal* in 2003. She has lived in Las Vegas since 1976.