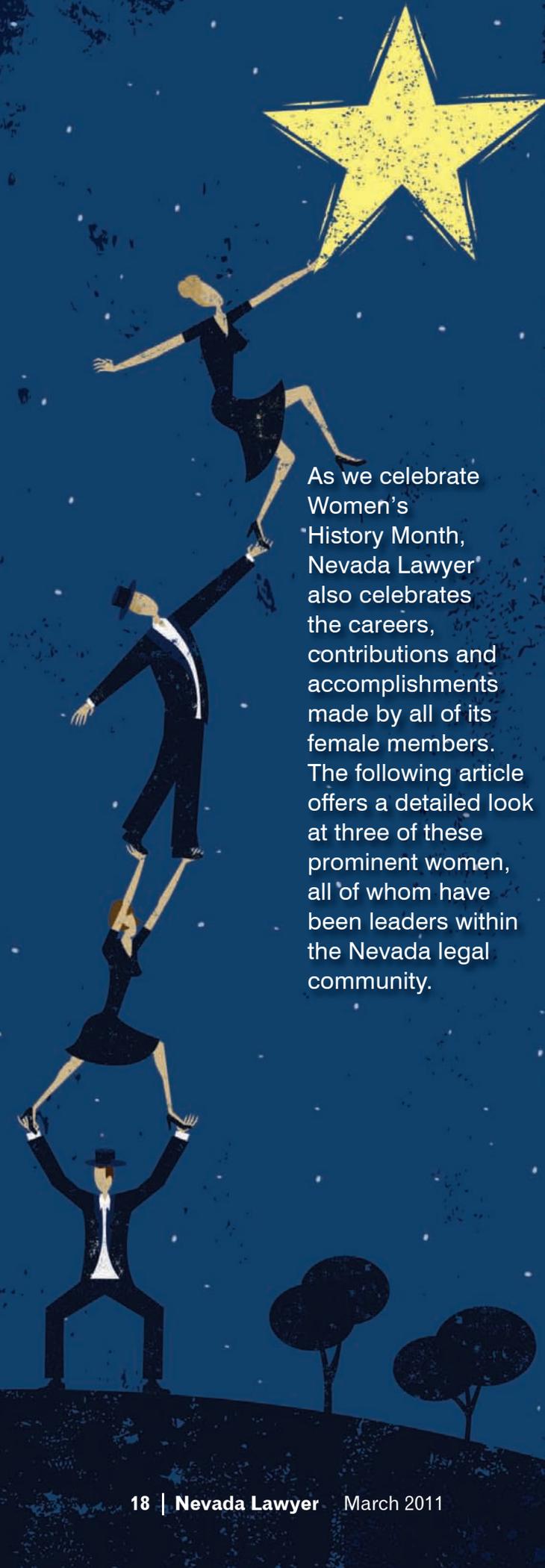


NEVADA'S FIRST LADIES OF LAW

A FEW OF THE WOMEN WHO LAID THE GROUNDWORK



As we celebrate Women's History Month, Nevada Lawyer also celebrates the careers, contributions and accomplishments made by all of its female members. The following article offers a detailed look at three of these prominent women, all of whom have been leaders within the Nevada legal community.



HON. JOHNNIE RAWLINSON
First Female U.S. District Court Judge and First Female Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals Judge from Nevada

BY HON. ROBERT JOHNSTON

Education is a great equalizer – a message supported by Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Johnnie B. Rawlinson. She visits every classroom, at every grade level, to share her practical wisdom with students. Raised in a company town, Kannapolis, North Carolina, where her parents worked in the factory producing towels for Cannon Mills, schools were segregated until late in her high school years. About being part of the first integrated graduating class she said that it was “very hard for young people to lead ... in the integration of society.”

After high school, it was off to college at North Carolina A & T where she graduated summa cum laude. Her original goal to be a teacher was abandoned in favor of a fascination with the courses and cases studied by a friend in law school. A high score on the LSAT produced a scholarship offer to attend McGeorge School of Law, University of the Pacific, in Sacramento, California. The cross-country move was made easier by her marriage to college sweetheart, Dwight. They had been introduced at a homecoming dance by a mutual friend. Dwight entered the U.S. Air Force and was assigned to Mather Air Force Base in Sacramento. Rawlinson was surprised to find that nearly half of the entering class was women, though there were not many students of color.

The law school years had some interesting challenges for Rawlinson: At the end of the first year, Dwight was transferred to Nellis Air Force Base in Las

Vegas. Then, during her second year at McGeorge, their daughter Monica was born, conveniently during spring break. Undeterred, Rawlinson took her daughter to class in a basket, which worked well until the next year when Monica became more mobile, and in one class walked to the front of the large lecture hall.

Rawlinson persisted in the pursuit of her education, always reading ahead because she did not want to ever fall behind. Success followed and in 1979 she graduated with distinction from McGeorge School of Law. She sought a judicial clerkship in the state and federal courts in Nevada, but got “no nibbles.”

Her legal career began with a temp job in human resources at Nellis AFB and weekend work for a local attorney. She was shortly directed to Legal Services where she landed a full time position until a referral by Booker Evans led to a Deputy District Attorney appointment. The early days were spent in the criminal division with stacks of preliminary hearings. Soon she was trying felony cases, where her first jury trial had her opposite Assistant Public Defender, Peggy Leen. A transfer to the civil division provided more variety, and “fleshed out [her] knowledge of the law.” Rawlinson learned so many areas of the law that she has labeled that period a “post-graduate degree representing the many agencies.”

She became a chief deputy, and then in 1995 was appointed to the position of Assistant District Attorney, where she supervised the civil, family support and administrative divisions in the Clark County District Attorney’s office. District Attorney Stewart Bell said at her investiture as a U.S. District Court Judge that when he made her his assistant, he **“gave her unreasonable responsibilities and expectations that nobody could possibly meet, and that notwithstanding, she exceeded them.”**

Performance above and beyond all expectations, with humble professionalism and integrity, led to her appointment as a U.S. District Court Judge in 1998. Two years later she was appointed and confirmed a judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals making Rawlinson the first African-American woman to sit on that court. Recognized by many organizations for her contributions to the bar and the community, she remains grounded in her family. Her daughter Monica, who explored the law school lecture hall as a toddler, is now a medical doctor. Her other daughter, Traci, is a graduate of UNLV and her son, David, is a university student in California.

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EDNA COVERT PLUMMER
Nevada's first female district attorney

Eureka county commissioners made history on May 13, 1918, when they appointed Edna Covert Plummer as the state's first female District Attorney.

Plummer wasn't just the first female D.A. in Nevada either; she was the first female D.A. in the country. Plummer had run for the position the previous November, but didn't win the election. After her predecessor became ill, Plummer was appointed by the county commissioners to fill the vacant position.

Plummer was appointed D.A. just 11 years after she first entered the legal profession. She graduated from Chicago-Kent College of Law in 1907.

“In those days,” she reflected in a May 1, 1996 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. “It was well-nigh impossible for a girl to be admitted to a law school, moreover graduate from it.” But graduate she did – with honors.

After graduation, Plummer was admitted to the Illinois bar and opened her own law practice in Chicago. Five years after opening her practice, she married Thomas Plummer and the couple moved to Mineral Hill, Nevada. Plummer was admitted to the Nevada bar on September 4, 1912 and, just a few months later, was admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, an honor that was rarely bestowed on women.

Plummer was involved in many of the civic activities in Mineral Hill and became quite well-known after raising more than \$48,000 in war bonds (the equivalent of nearly \$700,000 in today's currency) for the Eureka County Council of Defenses. Her involvement and concern for her community caught the attention of the county commissioners who unanimously appointed her as the first female district attorney in 1918. She was never elected to that position. After serving as district attorney, she relocated to Los Angeles, where she continued to practice law.

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A big smile and a warm laugh are gifts to everyone Rawlinson meets. "I hope I've been a role model," she said. She has, and continues to be a role model to all members of the bar.

MARGO PISCEVICH

**First Female President,
State Bar of Nevada**

**BY CHRISTINA ALBERTS,
STAFF WRITER**



Being the first, or only, female in a group has been a recurrent theme in the life of Margo Piscevich. From her first legal endeavor at the University of Utah Law School, fate seemed to set Piscevich apart, "I was the only woman at law school, I had a whole class of big brothers. They were very supportive," she said. Piscevich began law school during her senior year of college and managed to pass the bar before she'd finished her coursework.

When Piscevich was admitted to the State Bar of Nevada, she became the fifth female attorney practicing in northern Nevada. She was the first

female elected to membership in the Northern Nevada American Board of Trial Advocates, a group that bases membership on a successful jury trial practice. When she was hired by an insurance defense firm in Reno, she was the only female in the industry – there weren't other female attorneys or even females in the claims offices.

Of all the firsts Piscevich has made, she is perhaps most known in Nevada for being elected, in 1994, as the first female president of the State Bar of Nevada.

Although it would seem that being the first or only female would be intimidating, Piscevich said having a good attitude, as well as a decent sense of humor, made some of the challenges she faced easier.

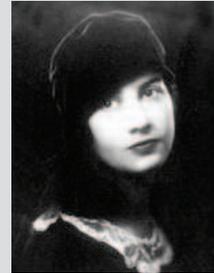
“When people asked me if I was a secretary I said no, I was here as a lawyer; I was perceived differently,” she said.

Her accomplishments and perseverance earned her the title of “...pioneer for all women in the State of Nevada” (courtesy of former governor Robert Miller), and in her more than 40 years of practice, she hopes she has had a “Positive influence on women lawyers and young

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SALLIE RUPERTI SPRINGMEYER **One of Nevada's first female attorneys**

Wealthy New Yorker Sallie Maria Rupert Springmeyer stepped off a train in Reno in 1930 seeking a divorce. She got her divorce and found a new husband: her divorce attorney, George Springmeyer.

Wanting to better understand her husband's work, Springmeyer began attending law school at Stanford. Neither the faculty nor the Dean bothered to hide their annoyance at having to teach law to female students. However, Springmeyer persevered, receiving her Juris Doctorate from the University of Southern California.

After becoming one of the first female attorneys in the state of Nevada, Springmeyer used her knowledge to occasionally assist her husband. Mostly, she used

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women lawyers...as a good role model, leader and mentor.”

During her time as the president of the bar, Piscevich appointed several young female lawyers to various positions and tried to get more women involved in the legal community. Piscevich said she encourages attorneys, both male and female, to be involved in their profession and move away from the trend of being too busy to take on extracurricular activities.

“[You] need to balance and give back. Without giving back we don't have successful organizations,” Piscevich said. She also remarked that lawyers need to assist other lawyers and realize the importance of giving back to their community.

Piscevich herself has always been an active member of the Nevada legal community; she has served as a member of the Board of Governors, a chair for the fee dispute committee (a job she

did for seven years), as a member of the Nevada Supreme Court Gender Bias Task Force, as chair of the Washoe Legal Services board for four years, as a sitting member of the Nevada Supreme Court committee on lawyer advertising and as a member of former Chief Justice Rose's Urban Court Workload Assessment committee.

Piscevich said the best advice she can offer her fellow female attorneys who may face challenges is to strive to be the best lawyer you can be.

“Be as prepared as you can, that's how you earn respect.” Piscevich said female attorneys need to remember that honesty and integrity build strong reputations and female attorneys need to remember “Your reputation is what helps you get through it.”

Piscevich started her legal career working for the Nevada Attorney General's office in Reno in the Highway Department, which tried cases based on negligent design and construction of highways as

well as condemnation cases. Piscevich worked for the Attorney General for four years and went on to join a Reno-based insurance defense firm, where she spent four years. In 1978, she opened a solo insurance defense firm and later added partner Kim Fenner to her practice, which is now known as Piscevich & Fenner.

HON. PHYLLIS ATKINS

First Woman on Nevada's Federal Court

BY JENNI SMITH, STAFF WRITER



When asked to describe how it felt to become the first woman on the Nevada federal court bench, Hon. Phyllis Atkins compared the experience to “working in a fish bowl” – completely transparent. Although keenly aware that Nevada’s legal community was paying close attention to her career, the scrutiny did not diminish her sense of pride upon her appointment to U.S. Magistrate Judge.

Early Life and Education

Atkins was born in Loveland, CO., in 1934. Raised on a farm, her earliest school experiences took place in a one-room schoolhouse. As she matured, she attended a boarding high school in Washington State. Upon graduating, she continued her education at Walla Walla College in College Place, WA., where she majored in Business Administration with a minor in music. In 2008, Atkins was honored by Walla Walla College as a distinguished alumnus.

Challenges for a Working Woman

After her graduation in 1957, Atkins relocated to San Diego where she was

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her knowledge to enhance her public service work; she sat on Nevada’s State Board of Health, attended the Nevada Social Welfare Conference and the White House Conference on Children and Youth, Chaired the Nevada Probation and Parole Association, was heavily involved in School legislation and was a founder of Nevada’s League of Women Voters.

Later in life, Springmeyer switched her focus to volunteer work. She spent her days tutoring students, helping seniors draft living wills and visiting the elderly. Springmeyer passed away in 2007 at the age of 104. Before her death, she was the oldest female member of the state bar.

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employed by Humphrey Castings, a company that crafted machined aluminum parts for the aircraft industry. She worked there as a bookkeeper, accountant and assistant until 1962 when the company went out of business.

Atkins' original goal was to continue her career at another company, but she struggled to find a company willing to hire a woman for the positions she wanted. While standing next to an equal-opportunity employment sign at one prospective company, the receptionist told her the hiring manager refused to consider her. "Women just tend to be troublemakers," the hiring manager told her.

Legal Education

After similar experiences with other employers, Atkins began exploring other career options. "I remembered that I took business law [in college]," she said. "I liked that a lot, and I thought, well, maybe I'll go to law school."

Atkins was accepted into California Western University. The dean permitted her to begin classes prior to taking the LSAT exam, contingent upon taking and scoring well on the next available exam. She did. During her time at Cal Western, Atkins also served as president of the women's legal fraternity.

Practicing Law: One of Only Three Women in Reno

After graduating in 1965 and taking the California bar exam, Atkins relocated to Reno, where she lived with her brother and sister-in-law and worked for a local law firm. At the time, she earned \$2.65 per hour, and there were only two other women attorneys in town, Nada Navakovich and Sylvia Thompson.

In 1966, Atkins was the only woman in Reno to take the Nevada bar exam. That year, she became the 46th female member of the State Bar of Nevada. The event was so rare at the time that the newspaper did a lengthy feature story to commemorate it. The focused attention would continue as Atkins' career progressed.

"I practiced in a fishbowl where everybody was watching me," she said. She continued practicing as an attorney in Reno for 16 years and became partner at the firm of Thornton, Stephens, Atkins and Kellison. She also worked as a solo practitioner with a high percentage of her time spent in employment law.

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HON. MIRIAM SHEARING
First female Chief Justice of the Nevada Supreme Court

When she retired from her position as Chief Justice of the Nevada Supreme Court, Miriam Shearing was honored, not only for her 27 years on the bench, but for the many firsts she achieved during her legal career. In 1977, she was the first female elected as a Justice of the Peace for Clark County; in 1982, she was the first woman elected as a judge for the District Court in Nevada; in 1992, she was the first female to sit on the Nevada Supreme Court; and in 1997 she was named the first female Chief Justice of the Nevada Supreme Court.

Shearing said, at one point, she was told by some county commissioners that women didn't have a place on the bench. It was then that Shearing realized if she was going to become a judge she would have to work hard and show voters she belonged there. She became known for her fairness and was elected to the bench three times in her career. Shearing was also known for her concentration on equal access to justice in the state of Nevada.

Shearing first came to Las Vegas during a hitchhiking tour, during which she predicted that Las Vegas wouldn't last. Despite her initial skepticism, she and her husband returned to the valley more than four decades ago. She opened a private practice in 1969.



PATTY CAFFERATA
First woman elected to constitutional office in Nevada

Patricia D. Cafferata successfully ran for state treasurer in 1982, becoming Nevada's first woman elected to a constitutional office. While working in the male-dominated world of politics, Cafferata says she did not encounter any gender discrimination. She said divisions were drawn along party lines. Campaigning was a different story. No matter the issues, while running for office she only ever got two questions: "How old are you?" and "What does your husband think of you doing this?" "Can you imagine anyone asking a man what his wife thought?" she laughs. "It wouldn't happen."

Post-politics, most of Cafferata's male colleagues simply returned to practicing law. She decided it was the right time and entered law school at age 47. She graduated after just two years through a brutal, fast-track program at the Southwestern School of Law in Los Angeles.

Cafferata eventually went into private practice in Reno, focusing on wills, trusts and probate. The many contacts she had made during her years in politics ensured her a steady stream of clients. Her practice remained a constant throughout her many positions, including deputy district

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attorney of Eureka County and District Attorney of Lincoln, Lander and Esmeralda counties. She is the only woman to serve as district attorney for three Nevada counties. She also served as the Executive Director of the Nevada Commission on Ethics. Cafferata currently serves on the Nevada Equal Rights Commission and the Assembly Special Committee of Ethics.



FRANKIE SUE DEL PAPA First female Secretary of State and Attorney General for Nevada

Native Nevadan Frankie Sue Del Papa knows the state of Nevada as few can. Having run four successful statewide election campaigns, she was sworn in as Nevada's first female Secretary of State in 1987. And in 1991, she became the state's first female Attorney General. She served three terms as A.G., concluding her service in 2002.

Del Papa led the office as it adapted to the changing needs of Nevadans. "We had a heavy emphasis on consumer protection," she said. During her time as A.G., the office tackled numerous cases dealing with illegal telemarketing, Medicaid fraud and tobacco litigation.

When speaking about that time, Del Papa emphasizes that her desire to help people was a strong motivator. "[Running for office], you become really familiar with the problems that people are facing, ...Politics and the law for me are about solving problems and helping people," she said. "If you can help someone, help them. If you can do some good, do [it]."

Del Papa now works as a consultant and teaches public policy courses at UNR. She also spends time feeding her desire to continue learning and to continue nurturing the environment. In addition to reading, painting and making jewelry, Del Papa recently spent time helping protect the century-old trees along the Truckee River. Her passion for trees is well-known; in 2001, she received the Frederick Law Olmsted Award from the National Arbor Day Foundation in recognition for her conservation efforts.

FRANNY FORSMAN First female Public Defender for Nevada

It had always been a dream of Franny Forsman's to be a federal public defender. After she graduated from Notre Dame Law School in 1977, she went looking for a job as a public defender; she was told women were only needed to represent juveniles.

Although she didn't get the job right out of school, Forsman finally got her wish in 1989. That year, she was appointed the Federal Public Defender for the District of Nevada by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, making her the first female public defender for the District of Nevada and the second female public defender in the United States. Prior to becoming a Federal Public Defender, Forsman was the first female partner at Beckley, Singleton, Delaney, Jemison & List (now Lewis and Roca).

"In an environment with not a lot of general diversity

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Judicial Appointment

In 1980, Atkins was encouraged by other women attorneys to apply for an open U.S. magistrate judge vacancy. She remembers the selection process as equitable. "There were two women on the panel," Atkins recalls. "Nobody tried to suggest, as I had experienced in some earlier state court panel interviews that since I had a young child I could not really hold down a judicial position. I didn't get that from any of the men."

Atkins was sworn in as Nevada's first female U.S. magistrate judge on August 27, 1980. Initially, she served part-time. In 1982, she became full-time.

Serving as Magistrate

Because of her location in northern Nevada, near most of the state prisons of the time, much of Atkins' work originated from the prisons, including the maximum security prison. She recalls, "The things that were going on just made me sick. ...I went down to the prison for hearings. I don't think this court had done that before. In that way, I was able to have people testify in prisoner civil rights cases but they wouldn't have to be away from their work."

Other memorable cases of Atkins' included an urgent trip to Guam to assist in a large number of detention hearings stemming from a significant drug bust, as well as a high-profile case regarding the bombing of Harvey's casino near Lake Tahoe.

Atkins regularly affirms her choice to pursue a legal career. "It has been a tremendous experience. ...I'm just so lucky that I found something I love to do." When asked to give advice to other women considering applying for judicial vacancies, Atkins said

"If you think you would like it, try it! I certainly enjoyed it." ■

... you have to find a way to work with it. Find ways to do it without moving your principles," Forsman says, reflecting on her experience.

Forsman has some advice to share with female lawyers: "Find an excellent mentor. It doesn't need to be a woman; find somebody who will tell you how it really works ... who will teach you how to practice in a professional, practical and ethical way."

Forsman says her own mentor, the late Rex Jemison, taught her that she didn't have to be mean or abrasive to prove that she was equal to her male counterparts.

"There is a feeling that, somehow, proving [yourself] has to go on, [you must be as] tough as a man. There's the tendency to be harsh. You don't have to do that; Rex taught me that," Forsman said.



**KATHRYN
LANDRETH**
First female U.S.
Attorney for Nevada

Kathryn Landreth served as the U.S. Attorney for the District of Nevada from 1993 to 2001.

President Clinton nominated her following Senator Harry Reid's recommendation. Her nomination was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in September 1993.

During her time as U.S. Attorney, Landreth was responsible for representing the United States in all criminal and civil litigation arising in the district. Of the numerous cases on which she worked, she is particularly proud of those cases that addressed significant problems within the state, exemplified by her work prosecuting telemarketing fraud cases. "Back in the 1990s, telemarketers were preying on the elderly, lonely and mentally infirm and taking thousands of dollars from them and leaving many destitute," she recalls. "It was a problem that went unchecked in Nevada [before then], and it was a major undertaking for us."

She notes that Nevada's unique environment had an impact on the caseload. "In Nevada, it was interesting having the legal and criminal issues of an urban office, but we also had unique public land and Indian country issues. It was a really interesting blend of cases," she said.

In addition to serving as U.S. Attorney, Landreth has worked in both private practice and as staff counsel for a variety of government and corporate entities. Her work has taken her from Reno to Sweden, where she spent a year as a visiting lecturer at the University of Lund, and back to Nevada where she currently works as the state director for the Nature Conservancy in Reno. ■