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Margaret M. Morrow

U.S. District Judge Margaret M. Morrow is trying to reignite a stalled plan to build a new courthouse in Los Angeles.



Margaret M. Morrow

Career highlights: Judge, U.S. District Court, Central District of California, Los Angeles, 1998-present; partner, Arnold & Porter, Los Angeles, 1996-1998; shareholder, Quinn, Kully & Morrow, Los Angeles, 1987-1996; associate, partner, Kadison, Pfaelzer, Woodard, Quinn & Rossi, Los Angeles, 1974-1987

Law school: Harvard Law School, 1974

Age: 59

By Ciaran McEvoy

Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - A literary analogy for the opening of a new federal courthouse in Los Angeles could be Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot." But U.S. District Judge Margaret M. Morrow is hoping to change that.

A member of the Central District of California's ad hoc courthouse committee since joining the federal bench in 1998, Morrow has worked with the Los Angeles mayor's office, numerous members of Congress and the General Service Administration to move forward the long-delayed project.

The courthouse has been stalled because of its estimated expense - \$1 billion - red tape and the recession that hit Southern California's construction businesses hard. The future federal courthouse site is currently a giant dirt hole, ringed by a chain link fence, comprising a city block in downtown Los Angeles.

Nevertheless, Morrow said she is "optimistic and hopeful" that the nation's second-largest city will get a new home for its federal judges.

"We've had some extremely positive conversations with GSA about how to proceed," Morrow

said, though she declined to elaborate further. "I hope in the next several months they'll bear fruit."

Besides Morrow's behind-the-scenes leadership on the court - she also sits on the court's case management and assignment, and alternative dispute resolution committees - she manages a full caseload.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Cheryl O'Connor Murphy, who prosecuted a family accused of running an international sex trafficking ring, called Morrow "very intelligent and dedicated."

"Although she can be a tough audience, you know she will listen to your argument and, whichever way she rules, that you will have gotten a fair shot," Murphy said. "A lawyer really can't ask for anything more than that."

Other lawyers who have appeared in Morrow's courtroom note her strong work ethic, attention to detail and her well-prepared tentative rulings.

"When the person in the black robe in the courtroom is the smartest, best prepared, fairest and has the best moral compass in the room, the result is going to always be good," said Deputy Federal Public Defender Reuven L. Cohen.

Perhaps Morrow's morals and ethics stem from her small town roots.

An only child, Morrow was born in Columbus, Neb., in 1950. She has fond memories of the town's centennial, which was celebrated just before her family moved to California when she was six years old.

Her father, George E. Morrow, landed a job at Union Bank when the family moved to San Gabriel. He became a lawyer late in life - obtaining his law license when Morrow was a 6th grade student at St. Therese School in Alhambra.

At Pasadena's Mayfield Senior School of the Holy Child Jesus, Morrow was in the glee club, edited the yearbook and played tennis.

In 1968, Morrow began attending Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania - majoring in history.

Taking only three years to get her bachelor's degree, Morrow then attended Harvard Law School, which had only recently begun to admit women. On her first day at Harvard, she keenly felt the sting of discrimination and prejudice, including that of one male student who took umbrage when she told him she was studying law.

"He literally turned, looked at me and said, 'What are you doing taking the place of a man who wants to provide for his family?'"

"I was just really stunned because having come from where I came from I never heard anything quite like that," Morrow said.

Upon graduation in 1974, Morrow worked for Kadison, Pfaelzer, Woodard, Quinn & Rossi, where she stayed for 13 years. In 1987, 10 partners left to form the smaller practice of Quinn, Kully & Morrow. That firm merged in 1996 with Arnold & Porter.

Unlike many of the handful of women in her law school class, Morrow stayed in private practice her entire career as a lawyer.

"You couldn't show weakness, but it was worth it," she said, recalling her days as a trailblazing female attorney.

After working as a mediator and getting involved in court-related issues as president of the State Bar of California, President Bill Clinton nominated Morrow to the federal bench in 1995 - sparking a partisan political fight that delayed her eventual confirmation for nearly three years.

Looking back, Morrow is philosophical about the experience.

"When you're going to give somebody life tenure, then I think it's an appropriate inquiry to comb through their background, to learn as much as you can learn about their views and as much as you can about how they're going to act so you can anticipate that they're going to act as a judicial officer," Morrow said.

Since then, she has been known as one of the hardest-working judges in the busy Central District.

"Literally, I have never been bored a single day here," she said. "I'm still learning new things in terms of the body of law."

While rumored to be a potential nominee for the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Morrow insists, "I'm happy in my current job."

In addition to triumph, there also has been tragedy. In September 2007, Morrow's husband, 2nd District Court of Appeal Justice Paul Boland died of cancer.

Morrow credits her judicial colleagues with helping her endure the loss.

"They just closed around me and helped me get through it," she said. "I will be grateful to them forever."

In her free time, Morrow looks after her parents, is an avid Lakers and Dodgers fan, watches tennis (especially Roger Federer), reads mysteries and spy novels, and spends time with her golden retrievers, Molly and Paddy.

Her son, Patrick Boland, is a deputy press secretary for Rep. Scott Murphy, a Democratic congressman who represents a district in upstate New York.

*Here are some of Judge Morrow's recent cases and the lawyers involved:*

*United States v. Valenzuela*, CR 07-11 - sex trafficking

For the plaintiff: Cheryl O'Connor Murphy, U.S. attorney's office, Los Angeles

For the defense: Ivan L. Klein, Ivan Klein Law Offices, Santa Monica

*Wilshire Associates Inc. v. Ashland Partners & Co. LLP*, CV 08-3008 - breach of contract

For the plaintiff: Eric M. George, Browne Woods George, Los Angeles

For the defense: Andrew A. August, Pinnacle Law Group, San Francisco

*Henry v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, CV 08-6625 - FDIC dispute

For the plaintiff: Michael D. Stein, Tisdale & Nicholson, Los Angeles

For the defense: Rita M. Hausler, Hughes Hubbard & Reed, Los Angeles

*United States v. Karapetyan*, CR 09-321 - health care fraud

For the plaintiff: Stephen M. Arkow, U.S. attorney's office, Los Angeles

For the defense: Michael J. Treman, Michael J. Treman Law Offices, Santa Barbara

*Friendly Family Production LLC v. Little House on the Prairie*, CV 08-6602 - trademark infringement

For the plaintiff: Marcia B. Paul, Davis Wright Tremaine, New York

For the defense: Gail J. Standish, Winston & Strawn, Los Angeles

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