Former Napa Prosecutor Elevated to Court of Appeals

Justice Monique Langhorne Wilson (left) was sworn in as Associate Justice of the First District Court of Appeal, Division One in San Francisco by Presiding Justice Teri L. Jackson. Photo courtesy of the Judicial Council of California

By Carlos Villatoro Public Affairs and Media Officer

At the age of four, while most children are learning their ABCs, Justice Monique Langhorne Wilson began telling anyone who would listen that she would one day become an attorney.

She doesn’t remember saying this to her mother back in the day, but her mother sure does, she recalls. Nevertheless, the desire to practice law stuck with her through adolescence and formed the basis of a career that was recently recognized with an appointment to the Third District Court of Appeal in San Francisco.

Justice Langhorne Wilson’s career has taken several twists and turns within Napa County. With stints in Napa County Child Support Services, as a deputy district attorney with the Napa County District Attorney’s Office, Commissioner for the Napa County Superior Court and up until

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One of the best parts of my job is being asked to speak at various service clubs, community service organizations or schools in our County. It’s important for me to hear what is on the minds of our residents and I am always interested in the kinds of questions I am asked.

To that end, we will soon be opening a Speaker’s Bureau so that local groups who want us to speak at their events can easily sign up to have myself, or a member of my staff, visit and talk about the work we do on behalf of the People.

On February 8, I spoke with a group of Girl Scouts (average age about 9 years old) and fielded the following fantastic questions from our future female leaders:

**How many years did it take you to become a lawyer?**
Four years of college plus three years of law school. Followed by taking and passing a bar exam.

**Was law school hard?**
Not really. It was just a lot of reading and fortunately, I love reading.

**What are important traits to have to become a lawyer?**
Being honest, logical and having a good understanding of what justice is.

**What was your hardest case?**
Any case involving children is hard.

**Have you tried a murder case?**
Yes. I remember being very nervous before trial began. In fact, I still get nervous every time I have an important hearing in court.

**What were you like when you were our age?**
I was a very, very quiet and shy little girl who hardly ever talked! And now my job involves lots of public speaking.

**What is your favorite marine animal?**
Octopus!
recently, before her appointment to the Court of Appeals, as a Napa County Superior Court Judge, Justice Langhorne Wilson has seen and done a lot in Napa County’s criminal justice community.

But among the hundreds of cases she has presided over and prosecuted, one case has stuck with her through the years.

“There was this little girl who was sexually molested by her step grandfather, and she came from a very big family, and she was part of the stepfamily,” she explains. “The way she was able to describe what happened, no 8-year-old would know these things unless something happened to them. To see that little girl, get up there on that stand, she was so brave, and she was scared because there were other family members that didn’t believe her and she was able to tell her truth.”

Then Deputy District Attorney Langhorne Wilson prosecuted the grandfather and he was convicted of sexually molesting his step granddaughter and sent to prison, where he eventually died, Justice Langhorne Wilson said.

“That case has always stuck with me because of how brave that little girl was – being a victim of this, knowing that this happened to her and not being believed by many people in her own family,” she said.

A former colleague and good friend of Justice Langhorne Wilson, Napa County Assistant District Attorney Paul Gero also remembers the case, as it was originally his to begin with.

“I noticed right away that Monique had an innate sense of justice and she always did what was right on a case,” he recalled. “As a prosecutor, she was tough, fair and compassionate – to victims and defendants alike. The Napa community was lucky to have her start her career as a prosecutor.”

Bravery, fairness and compassion have been common career themes for Justice Langhorne Wilson, said to be the first African American deputy district attorney, commissioner and judge in Napa’s judicial history.

Adversity is yet another theme that has peppered Justice Langhorne Wilson’s career.

Take the time she studied at UC Berkeley School of Law. It was her second year of law school and Proposition 209 passed, changing the dynamic of the student body.

“Unfortunately, what that meant to other people was because myself, and other people that look like me, were there at that school, we got in because we were black,” she said. “There were students who would say ‘Oh, you took my friends spot!’ In other words, a more deserving white student could have gotten the spot that I got. And so that made it very difficult to be on campus.”
INSIDE THE DA’S OFFICE

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The number of African American students from her second year of law school drop from 18 students to 1 the following year. Nevertheless, Justice Langhorne Wilson did not let it deter her from achieving her goal of becoming an attorney.

“At that point I thought ‘Well, school’s a means to end, I just have to get through no matter what’s going on on-campus,’” she said.

Fast forward several years later to 2020. Justice Langhorne Wilson had been on the bench in the Napa County Superior Court for approximately two years and was up for re-election.

Of five judge who were also up for re-election, she was the sole judge to face an opponent in attorney Clifford Blackman, marking the first time in more than 30 years that a sitting judge would face a challenger on the ballot, according to local news reports.

“It was awful especially because I didn’t think it would ever happen, we hadn’t had a contested judicial election for 40 years, so it was not on anyone’s radar,” she said.

Asked why it is so rare for a sitting judge to be challenged during re-election, Justice Langhorne Wilson explained: “We are a smaller county versus Alameda or San Francisco, where it happens more regularly. People get to know their judges. Unless you are doing something that’s just egregious, there no reason why you would try to unseat a sitting judge. I have no political bones in my body, I thought ‘I don’t even know how to do this.’”

With a little faith and a lot of help from her family, husband and daughter, her ever-present sister circle, and retired Napa County Superior Judge Ray Guadagni, she successfully won the election, earning her six years on the bench in Napa.

Her pathway to the Court of Appeal was paved by a three-month stint as justice pro tem for the Appellate Court, where she would be challenged by the presiding Justice to leave her career in Napa to join the Court of Appeal in San Francisco.

“She said ‘Have you put your application in? I would be very disappointed in you if you don’t get it in by the time you are done with this pro tem job,’” Justice Langhorne Wilson recalls. “That sort of lit the fire. I didn’t want to disappoint her.”

Asked what advice she would give to anyone seeking to begin a career in the practice of law, Justice Langhorne Wilson said, “Never be afraid to tell people what you want to do, you will never know who you are going to meet. Seek out internships for students who are looking to go into the law. Go to a private attorney, a DA’s office or a public defender’s office and say, ‘Can I shadow you for a day?’ So you know whether or not this is something that you want to do.”

Sidebar Podcast: Let’s Talk About Teen Dating Violence

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

In the latest edition of the Sidebar Podcast, I caught up with Victim Witness Advocate Adella Piñon-Diaz who just completed a Victim Academy Training, where she learned about teen dating violence.

Adella discusses the signs of teen dating violence, why it’s so difficult for teens to exit such a relationship, and what can be done if you know of or are someone in a teen dating violence situation. Visit the Napa DA’s YouTube channel to access the podcast.
New Law Prohibits Possession, Sale of Body Armor to Convicted Criminals

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

The new year signaled a slew of new laws designed to improve public safety in California, but one recent law that went into effect on January 1, 2024, seems to be causing a wave of chatter among attorneys, defendants, and judges alike in Napa County – and it has to do with body armor.

The law, AB 92, prohibits a person from purchasing or possessing body armor if state law prohibits them from possessing a firearm.

The bill's author, Assemblymember Damon Connolly, D-San Rafael, cites a study conducted by The Violence Project, a nonprofit group that tracks mass shooting trends, that found most shooters who have worn body armor have done so within the last decade.

"Mass shootings are an epidemic in our country," Assemblymember Connolly stated in a recent press release issued by his office. "Keeping this tool out of the hands of potential criminals is an important step in protecting public safety."

Under current law, Penal Code 31360, it is a felony for a person who has been convicted of a violent felony to purchase, own, or possess body armor. The bill amends that law to make it a misdemeanor for a person who is prohibited from possessing a firearm under California law to purchase, own, or possess body armor.
Erin Harper, Victim Witness Services Manager

Erin joins the Napa County District Attorney’s Office from CALICO, the Children’s Advocacy Center for Alameda County. Erin worked at CALICO for 14 years, most recently serving as its Executive Director. Before becoming Executive Director, she held multiple other positions at CALICO including Forensic Interviewer, Multi-Disciplinary Interview Team Coordinator and Children’s Advocacy Centers of California State Director.

During her time at CALICO, she conducted trainings on child sexual abuse both nationally and internationally, testified before the state legislature in support of the passage of two successful bills, conducted over 600 forensic interviews of abused children, supervised a staff of 10 and administered grants of over $2 million. Prior to working at CALICO, Erin was an Associate Attorney at Pillsbury’s San Francisco Office.

Erin received her undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania, where she majored in European History and was active with the West Philadelphia Tutoring Project. She received her law degree from UC-Hastings, where she competed on the Moot Court team and was a part of the Constitutional Law Quarterly journal. She is thrilled to join the Napa County DA’s Office and work on behalf of victims in this community.

Nohely Moreno, Legal Secretary

Nohely joins the Napa County District Attorney’s Office as a Legal Secretary I. Nohely has five years of law office experience including a notable three-year tenure in a small law office in Solano County. There, she started off as the front desk receptionist and quickly worked her way up to legal assistant. With the guidance of the attorney, Nohely oversaw all the family law cases, demonstrating a high level of autonomy and responsibility.

Currently Nohely is a student at San Francisco State University and is set to graduate in early 2025. Nohely navigates the delicate balance between academic pursuits alongside a background of office administration. Nohely’s passion to make a positive impact fuels her commitment to contributing to the legal field.

She looks forward to utilizing her expertise in support of the Napa District Attorney’s Office to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all the residents of Napa County. Nohely is also bilingual and bicultural, adding further value to the office and the community.
NEWS Recognizes Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month

By Karla Salazar
Youth Prevention Services Advocate, NEWS

NEWS-Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse Services takes relationships seriously, especially when it comes to middle and high school students in the Napa Valley who might not be aware of what a healthy relationship looks like.

Through NEWS’ outreach, especially throughout February in observance of Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, teens are taught about respect, consent, and the warning signs of teen dating violence such as a partner checking your cell phone without permission, constantly putting you down, telling you what to do, isolating you from family or friends, and extreme jealousy.

If someone is currently in an unhealthy relationship, they can reach out to our agency for help. We are in all middle and high school Wellness Centers in the NVUSD, we have a 24/7 help line at (707) 255-6397, or teens can direct message us on Instagram @NEWS4Peace. There are also many other national resources like Loveisrespect.org and One Love Foundation that offer more information about unhealthy/healthy relationships.

Teen dating violence is important because the youth are our future. Spreading awareness and education on this topic is crucial so that our future generations can live free from intimate partner violence. Some teens are not aware that this is an issue since society has “normalized” unhealthy relationships. One in 5 women and 1 in 7 men who experienced rape, physical violence, and stalking by an intimate partner first experienced some form of partner violence between 11 and 17 years of age. The time is now to stop that narrative and let our youth know they can have healthy relationships.

The role that NEWS’ prevention department plays in helping teens is huge. NEWS has the YOUth Matter program available for middle/high school aged youth. This program offers confidential 1-1 healthy relationship coaching to youth who need support. Youth can be referred to this program through a counselor, social worker, family/friend, or even by an online self-referral form. The prevention team also goes to various school campuses and holds presentations on healthy relationships and workshops. During Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, we decorate the window display at the Napa County District Attorney’s office on First Street across from Dwight Murray Plaza, and we record radio ads for KVON/KVYN radio. We also are collaborating with La Cheve Bakery and Brews on Instagram and with a Paint Night, hosting Orange4Love campaigns at various school sites, and new this year we are attending a student-led podcast on the topic of Teen Dating Violence.
IN THE COMMUNITY

Out & About

Justice Langhorne Wilson Swearing in Ceremony 1/30/2024

Latinos Leaders Roundtable 02/16/2024

Community Corrections Partnership Swearing in 02/15/2024

Hate Crimes Summit 1/30/2024

Photo credits (clockwise): Paul Gero, Foster family, Lauren Weitz, and U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California
People V. Benjamin Casas

A Napa jury convicted Benjamin Casas, age 34, of 18 counts lewd or lascivious acts with a person under the age of 14 years, three counts of oral copulation of a person under 14, and one count of forcible oral copulation minor victim / under 14.

The jury also found true the special allegations of sex crime involving a person under 14; position of trust; vulnerable victim; planning sophistication, and professionalism; and lewd and lascivious act against more than one victim.

The Honorable Judge Francisca Tisher, who presided over the case, ordered Casas back in court at 8:30 a.m., March 11, 2024, in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court for sentencing. Napa County Deputy District Attorneys Kecia Lind and Shashawnya Worley prosecuted the case against Mr. Casas on behalf of the People.

People V. Gilardo Garcia Alvarado

The California Board of Parole Hearings denied parole for Gilardo Garcia Alvarado, age 48, who is serving a life sentence for kidnapping and raping a then 18-year-old victim.

Alvarado stipulated to a three-year denial of parole, which was granted by the California Board of Parole Hearings on February 9, 2024, during a hearing that took place via teleconference at Chuckawalla Valley State Prison.

On March 14, 1999, Alvarado spotted the victim passed out drunk in her friend’s Chevrolet Blazer, which was parked at the Riverside Shopping Center. He obtained the keys to the car and drove her to an unknown location, where he undressed the unconscious woman and raped her. Alvarado then drove to a Chevron gas station on the corner of Imola and Soscol Avenues to get gas, where he was contacted and arrested by police.

Napa County Assistant District Attorney Paul Gero appeared at the hearing to argue against Alvarado’s parole, looking for a longer denial of parole based primarily upon the significant effect on the victim each time a hearing is required and the complete lack of accountability for his behavior by the prisoner.
**People V. Anthony Clark Gore**

The California Board of Parole Hearings denied parole for Anthony Clark Gore, age 61, who is currently serving a life sentence for the murder of his roommate, Dennis Wagner.

Gore stipulated to a three-year denial of parole; the California Board of Parole Hearings granted his request for parole denial during a hearing that took place via teleconference at California State Prison, Los Angeles County.

Gore stands convicted of beating and strangling his roommate Dennis Wagner to death at Napa State Hospital. Wagner, age 49 at the time of his death, was found deceased in his bed during the early morning hours of May 3, 2002, with numerous hemorrhages, contusions and abrasions, and his denture plate broken in several places.

Gore was convicted of first-degree murder on September 16, 2005, after a Napa jury found him sane at the time of the murder. He was sentenced to 25 years to life in state prison for the crime. Napa County Assistant District Attorney Paul Gero attended Gore’s February 8, 2024, parole suitability hearing prepared to argue against his release based on the cruelty and callousness of the murder, the egregious nature of his crime, lack of insight or remorse for the killing, and the unreasonable danger he presents to the community should he be paroled.

**People V. Ramon Lusby**

A Napa jury convicted Ramon Ray Lusby, age 24, of felony evading a peace officer and misdemeanor reckless driving during a week-long trial presided by Napa County Superior Court Judge Rodney Stone.

The court also found true the special allegations of violent conduct; increasing seriousness of priors/sustained petitions; violence, cruelty, viciousness or callousness; prior prison term; probation or parole at the time of the incident; and prior poor performance on probation or parole.

The jury found true that on August 15, 2023, at approximately 12:05 p.m., Mr. Lusby failed to yield to American Canyon Police officers who attempted to pull him over for driving a vehicle without a front license plate. Mr. Lusby led the officers on a vehicle chase that reach speeds of 100 miles or more per hour, almost collided with multiple bystander vehicles, and drove through a red-light intersection and several red lights.

Mr. Lusby is due in court for sentencing on March 18, 2024, in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court. Napa County Deputy District Attorney Lisa Sharkey prosecuted the case against Mr. Lusby on behalf of the People.
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