

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

CASSANDRA LEE FURR DUNN

October 11, 1974



Cassandra Lee Furr Dunn was born on June 26, 1932 in Pinehurst, North Carolina, one of thirteen children in her family. As Dunn describes it, “I was the only one [in my family] who got past the seventh grade. Neither parent could read or write and we lived in a shack on the side of a mountain when I was growing up. I remembered what it was like to be dirt poor.” Dunn’s mother was full Cherokee and her father was half Shoshone and Dutch, making her “three-quarters” Native American.

Dunn recalls that her childhood was marked with abuse from her alcoholic father. Desperate to leave the “strange people” she called her family, in 1947, at the age of 15, she hitchhiked her way to Washington, D.C. Along the way, Dunn met a truck driver whom she later married. Dunn worked during the day and took classes at night to complete her high school education. On January 1, 1951, Dunn gave birth to her daughter, Kelly Dunn and, on the same day, her husband abandoned her.

Determined to make a better life for her daughter, Dunn sought education wherever she could, including “sneaking” college classes at George Washington University because she did not have the money to pay for them. Unfortunately, she was thrown out of those classes more than once, with the last time being the most memorable. Dunn recalls that she was sitting in class at GWU when two men came to “escort” her to leave, and one asked her “what the hell makes you think YOU can go to school?” At that moment, at the age of 20, Dunn decided that she was “sick and tired of being treated like a third-class citizen” and had to find a way “to do something” – that something, she would later learn, would be to become a lawyer.

Dunn left Washington, D.C. with her young daughter for Los Angeles in 1952. Having no money, she hitchhiked her way across the country, working at various “car hops” to pay her way. Once she made it to Los Angeles, she decided to move north to San Francisco, but when she got to Fresno she fell ill and had to stay. In 1954, she met and married her second husband and together they had a son, Edmund. Unfortunately, Edmund developed polio shortly before the Sauk vaccine was discovered, leaving him severely handicapped. More bad luck fell upon Dunn when she discovered that her husband was a child molester, causing her to leave him immediately and raise her two young children alone. Dunn took in sewing at night to meet the medical bills.

Although she was extremely busy raising her children and working three jobs (secretary, car hop and cosmetic salesperson), Dunn’s desire “to do something” had not waned. After flirting with the idea of going to medical school, but getting absolutely no help, Dunn decided that she wanted to become a lawyer. She knew, however, that she needed a college education to get into a law school. Fortunately, California was one of the few states that offered a college equivalency test to fulfill this requirement for graduate studies. Dunn took the test and received a “95.2%” – an outstanding score that she modestly discounts today. With that score, Dunn applied to and was accepted at Humphrey’s College of Law in Fresno, California, in 1959 (the same year she

learned her husband had formally divorced her). For four years, Dunn worked at numerous jobs during the day (and at night when she didn't have class), attended law school at night and raised her children as a single parent. She graduated from law school in 1963, and on January 6, 1964, was admitted to the California State Bar.

Dunn recalls that she could not get a legal job after law school. Although qualified, employers would say that they couldn't hire her because the secretaries in the office or their wives would "get upset." So, Dunn opened a one-room office next to the Fresno County courthouse and sat in courtrooms waiting to be assigned cases as a public defender for \$25 per case. After "beating the socks off" the district attorney for almost nine months, the Fresno County District Attorney offered her a job with a salary of \$620 per month. Dunn was wary of the offer, mostly because of the thirteen men in the office who had never treated her well, but she saw this as an opportunity. Her wariness proved well founded.

In August 1964, Dunn went to work as the first woman attorney for the Fresno County District Attorney's office, handling all types of criminal prosecutions. While she was successful in court, she was treated very badly by her fellow attorneys, investigators, law enforcement personnel and even the (female) secretaries. Sexual harassment and discrimination was the norm: she was propositioned and pinched by lawyers and judges alike. Dunn recalls a judge informing her that he was cutting a statutory probate fee on a case she was handling, but not her male co-counsel's fees, because "he had a family to feed." At the time, of course, Dunn was a single mother of two small children, one of whom was handicapped with special needs.

By 1966, Dunn had had enough of the District Attorney's office and left to open her own private practice where she handled criminal defense work and an increasing amount of civil work. Dunn's luck seems to have turned the corner during this time, as she met and married Don Kendall, a real estate developer, in 1968. They were married, until his death, for 25 happy years. Also during this time, Dunn was contacted by Native American groups to represent them in various, high-profile demonstration matters throughout the state, including the Native American occupation of a PG&E facility in Shasta County. In so doing, Dunn became a leading Native American attorney in California, attracting national attention. So much so, that in 1971 the White House called (actually John Ehrlichman) and offered her a job at the Environmental Protection Agency. Initially, she didn't believe the call and hung up on Ehrlichman saying, "sure, this is the Queen of England." But, after the mix-up was resolved, Dunn accepted the offer.

In 1971, Dunn went to work in San Francisco as Chief Legal Counsel for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region IV (the first woman to hold that position) under President Nixon. In her position at the EPA, Dunn was responsible for setting up hearing procedures throughout the west (Region IV), including trips to Idaho. After one such trip, Dunn decided to move to Idaho where she worked in Boise (for the EPA) and rented a house in Boise. Her husband stayed in Fresno, flying back and forth in his own plane. As Dunn describes it, he understood that she was "kind of a nomad" and liked to move from place to place. On October 11, 1974, Dunn was admitted to practice in Idaho. While in Idaho, Dunn worked on setting up procedures for hearings on environmental issues associated with the Snake River, and also recalls issues dealing with potato and sugar beet processors.

In 1975 Dunn decided to move to Santa Fe, New Mexico – another place she had visited during her EPA travels – and, therefore, resigned her active Idaho license. She passed the New Mexico

bar exam in 1975. “There were no women lawyers in New Mexico” when she arrived, Dunn recalls. And, a year later, there were even less women attorneys in New Mexico as Dunn decided to move back to California. Upon her return to California, Dunn left the EPA and started a private practice in Fresno. She received the Bronze Medal for Commendable Service for her work at the EPA. Dunn remained in private practice in Fresno until her retirement, and along the way also became a real estate broker and investor.

Having come a long way from the days of sneaking into college classes, Dunn has lectured at numerous universities in the West and Hawaii and taught American Indian Law at California State University in Fresno. She has also lectured at Hastings College of Law, Stanford University, American Waterworks Association, the National Association of Shopping Center Developers and “so many it is hard to even remember most of them.” Dunn has participated in a myriad of professional activities, including sitting as Judge of the Juvenile Court in Fresno County, California, writing law columns in newspapers, and serving on California State Attorney General task forces.

Dunn currently resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but true to her self-described “nomad” ways, is planning to relocate to a “house on the hill” in San Carlos, Sonora, Mexico within the year, which, she says, will be her “last stop.” She is currently writing a book chronicling some of the struggles she faced personally and professionally throughout her life entitled *Laughing Through the Tears*. Dunn hopes that, “perhaps it [the book] may be of inspiration to those many young women lawyers to come.”