

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

KRISTIE KUNAU STAFFORD

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Kristie Kunau Stafford was born in Burley, Idaho, in 1949 into a ranching and farming family. She has three brothers and one sister. Stafford grew up and went to school in Burley, graduating from high school in 1967. She says, “I did all the normal kids things growing up, but I was a ‘cowboy’ from the day I got my first pony until the last time I got on a horse in 1992.” She describes her childhood on the family ranch and farm as “hard work, but fun.”

Stafford began college immediately after high school at the University of Colorado in Boulder studying journalism, but eventually changed her major to political science. After two and a half years there, she decided to transfer to the University of Idaho in 1969 (a “much more peaceful and congenial place”). Stafford spent a semester on World Campus Afloat (now Semester at Sea), seeing Asia and Africa and experiencing the world.

In 1971, during the second semester of her senior year, several of Stafford’s friends persuaded her that she should join them in law school. She took the LSAT and applied, and was accepted at the University of Idaho College of Law.

Stafford married Ken Stafford in the summer of 1971 and the two started law school at the University of Idaho together (one of two married couples in the law school, Bob and Myrna Stahman (No. 45 on this list) being the other). After a year, however, Ken decided to pursue economics and left the law school for graduate work in economics. Stafford remained at the law school as one of only nine women in her class of 120 and one of its youngest members.

Stafford graduated from the University of Idaho College of Law in 1974 and immediately sat for the Idaho Bar exam. She was admitted to practice on October 11, 1974.

Stafford decided to practice in Moscow because her husband had been offered a job in information technology at the University of Idaho. In January 1975 she opened her own practice, sharing an office with Lloyd Martinson, a well-respected attorney in Moscow. Martinson acted as Stafford’s mentor for many years, and was always willing to share his files, forms and knowledge. In the fall of 1974, the law school hired Stafford to teach one section of first-year legal writing, an experience Stafford now describes as “excruciating... for both my students and myself.”

In November 1974, Stafford was appointed the Latah County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney, a part-time job she held for over eleven years. In early 1986, she retired from the prosecutor’s office to spend all of her time in private practice.

In 1989, Stafford and her husband moved to Maryland, where Ken became a vice-president at the University of Maryland. Stafford was hired by the U.S. Justice Department as an “attorney-advisor” for the U.S. Parole Commission. She spent four “wonderful years” there, defending the

government in habeas corpus, mandamus and damages actions, and generally keeping criminals who belonged there in prison. Stafford says that two high points in her Parole Commission career were being the lead attorney on the “Tylenol poison” case, and arguing a special parole case before the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals (which she won).

After her term at the Parole Commission expired, she found herself as the University of Maryland System —Director of Special Gifts” and in-house counsel for the University of Maryland Foundation —a whole new world.” As Director of Special Gifts, Stafford was responsible for the location, acquisition, management and taking care of all legal issues involved in real property and other non-monetary gifts for the System and the various institutions. She also provided legal advice to the Foundation, and assisted the individual institutions (12 of them at that time) in acquiring gifts. Stafford established some basic rules for property gifts (like mortgaged property is not acceptable), taught classes on property law, gifts and planned giving to the fundraisers at the institutions, and worked with potential donors.

Stafford was required to become a Maryland attorney and, therefore, “had the privilege of taking the Maryland Bar for practicing attorneys.” She passed and then waived into the District of Columbia Bar —which was much easier.”

Stafford says that she and Ken,

Had some great times in Maryland. We lived between Washington and Baltimore, and we took advantage of everything there was to do, see and participate in from Pennsylvania to southern Virginia — sight-seeing, museums, events, including President Clinton’s first inauguration, Gettysburg Civil War enactments, and community events and shows. We saw great works of art; history galore, met some of the politicians we only see on television, and generally, had a wonderful time for almost ten years.

In 1999, the Staffords moved to Denver when Ken was named Vice Chancellor for Technology for the University of Denver. In so doing, Stafford was required to take another exam — the professional responsibility test that she had managed to avoid until then. Again, she passed and became an active member in four different bar associations, all with different rules and requirements for CLEs.

After some searching and “excellent luck,” Stafford was hired as general counsel for a dot.com start-up, which “was lots of fun for about six months, until we ran out of money.” She then had the “dubious pleasure” of closing the company and handling all of the creditor and employee lawsuits for the next year.

Stafford then found herself as general counsel for a group of private corporations, all owned by two people. She currently operates between 12 and 14 companies that include everything from escrow services to scientific research, which keeps her very busy.

Reflecting on her more than thirty years of practice, Stafford says:

I have had what can only be termed a very eclectic career, but I’ve had many opportunities to do many different things within the law profession, and I have seldom, if ever, been bored in any of the various careers I have had.

Stafford and her husband currently live in Colorado where they enjoy all that the outdoors have to offer. They spend their summers off-roading in their Jeep, looking at gorgeous scenery, taking pictures, and occasionally having an adventure. Stafford reports that she has walked within two feet of a mountain goat, watched big-horn sheep bang heads, and taken thousands of pictures of mountains, wild flowers, trees, and animals. My only regret is that I have yet to see a bear.”