

PROFILE: SIDNEY TRIBE – Be Humble but Know Your Worth

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By Rory Cosgrove and Jason Anderson

It isn't in Sidney Tribe's nature to see herself as worthy of admiration, let alone an inspiration to others. It's something about her that even becoming an accomplished lawyer could not change. But admirable, inspiring, she is. Those who have seen her in the appellate courts know that she is a formidable, and yet respectful, advocate. Those who know her from her KCBA volunteer work know that she is dedicated and principled. And those who know Sid well know that humble is the best word to describe her.

Sid's childhood was marked by frequent transitions between a life of financial security to less privileged circumstances. Born in Ohio to middle-class parents, Sid grew up in Spokane, Washington, from age six months until sixteen. After her parents split when she was three, times were tight. Her mother remarried when Sid was six and divorced again when she was sixteen, prompting a jarring move to Seattle: from a small private school in Spokane with a sophomore class of 13 to Juanita High School and a junior class of 400. Still, academics were Sid's source of stability and control, and she enjoyed school.

Afraid to mortgage her or her mother's future by incurring debt, she made getting a full-ride scholarship a condition of her attending college. She got one from Willamette University and went on to be an award-winning English Literature major graduating with honors.

Sid returned to Seattle after college and spent the next five years trying to figure life out. Jealously guarding her independence, she politely declined to move back with mom, and found a low-income housing unit in the Denny Regrade area (there's a Whole Foods there now). She loved to sing but was not a skilled musician, so she founded and sang lead for an 80s cover band called Radio 80. (Cue Cheap Trick, Journey, and Pat Benatar.) She supported herself with a series of retail customer-service jobs (80's cover bands were not lucrative in the mid-90's).

Eventually, one of those jobs was in the legal space — where she finally found her calling. A temp agency placed her as a receptionist for a small law firm, where she would later become a legal assistant. Working in that environment expanded her view of what lawyers did. She was intrigued by their power

to do good for people, and she thought her writing skills were a natural fit. She decided to apply to law school.

Still daunted by the prospect of taking on significant debt, Sid applied only to the University of Washington School of Law, where in-state tuition was then a bargain at \$6,000 per year. Noteworthy was her self-deprecating law-school application essay. She wrote the essay as a letter addressed to herself from a fictional “essay-writing service” that would-be students could hire to make them sound amazing. In its “rejection letter,” the fictional company refused to write Sid’s essay because her life was too uninteresting. She even made faux letterhead.

Sid’s “rejection letter” essay apparently caught someone’s attention, and she was admitted. At age 28 having experienced the “real world,” she made the most of her time at UW Law. Among other things, she served as an Executive Articles Editor for the Washington Law Review, president of the Moot Court Honor Board, and was invited to join the Order of the Barristers. Most importantly for the course of her future career, she and her classmate won the UW Law 1L Appellate Advocacy Competition. Sid’s love of appellate advocacy was born.

Several events during law school helped shape the person and the lawyer Sid would become. First, she completed a summer clerkship at a large Seattle law firm without garnering a job offer. Four days after that rejection, she witnessed the fall of the Twin Towers in New York City on 9/11, while visiting a friend in Brooklyn. And just ten days before the bar exam, she met her future husband, an Australian called Mick. These events helped Sid focus on things that mattered to her, while letting go of things outside her control.

Though she ultimately found her dream job in appellate practice, Sid’s path to that career would, again, require patience. Her first post-law school job came about because of her role as a student representative for Rigos Bar Review. Sid was a prep book writer for Rigos — which allowed her to work remote for a month in Sydney, Australia, where she and Mick were engaged (they’ve resided together in Seattle ever since). As company founder Jim Rigos himself put it, Sid is “fiercely loyal and one of the most thoughtful people.” He added: “I knew Sid would do well at anything she put her mind to, and over 20 years later, she has proven me right.”

In 2005, Sid’s habit of biding her time would again pay off — twice in succession. On a tip from a friend, she applied for a clerkship with Judge Bill Baker of the Washington Court of Appeals, Division One. Judge Baker and his Judicial Assistant Maria Porteous could not have been better teachers about the appellate process and its important role in our judicial system. In 2007, another friend tipped her off to a post-clerkship job opportunity with former Legislator/Supreme Court justice (then private appellate practitioner) Phil Talmadge. She is pretty sure he hired her because she recognized a reference on a personalized license plate kept in his office: ‘NCC-1701.’ When asked recently about that job interview,

Talmadge noted: “Apart from Sid’s insightful notice of my Star Trek license plate, I recognized that Sid was a good person and would be an outstanding appellate lawyer.”

Sid credits her career development in great part to Talmadge's mentorship and trust in her abilities. When Sid walked into Talmadge’s firm on her first day in 2007, he said: “Hey Sid! Do you want to go back to Division One in two weeks for an oral argument?” She did, and Talmadge then allowed her to brief and argue that same case to the Washington Supreme Court less than a year later (the client won). After eight years as an appellate associate, she became a partner. Always open to new opportunities, Sid was intrigued when Carney Badley Spellman approached her in 2018 about joining its appellate group, of which she is now an integral member and mentor to the next generation of appellate lawyers (young lawyers who email her about appellate practice can always get a response — and an offer to chat over coffee).

Sid values the professional relationships she has built over time — even with those who are frequently her “competitors” in the appellate field. Shelby Lemmel, one of the finest appellate practitioners in the region, said of Sid: “It always surprises clients when I tell them opposing counsel is an excellent lawyer and a friend. Sidney is both. I am always happy to work with Sidney or against her, as I am to grab lunch together. She tells it like it is, can talk politics better than anyone else I know, and does both with a pretty wicked sense of humor.”

Sid has also made time to volunteer, including with KCBA — which she calls the “best legal community in the country.” KCBA and its mission aligns with her personal view that practicing law can empower people and better the community. She has served as chair of the Appellate Section, as a KCBA Trustee, as a member and then chair of KCBA’s Leadership Development and Nominations Committee, and on KCBA’s Executive Director Search Committee in 2020. On top of all that, every year since 2013 she has teamed up with Cynthia Jones to co-chair the KCBA Appellate Section’s Annual Reception with Division One. She and Jones also co-chaired the Court of Appeals’ 50th Anniversary celebration in 2019.

Despite her achievements, Sid has remained true to her roots as a person — unwavering humility; a commitment to her clients and community service; and a zest for living life to the fullest with her true love, Mick, and her beloved dog Jake.

Perhaps one day Sid will reprise her role as the lead singer of a cover band — and even perform a farewell tour. She “seriously doubts anyone would want to see that.” Regardless, Sid will continue to rock her community and the appellate bar.