

DIVERSITY

Dialogues

Kris K. Singh, Principal Court Attorney to Fourth District Administrative Judge Vito C. Caruso, talks to us about the rewards and challenges of his multi-faceted role in making the courts work.

ON DIVERSITY:

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Susan Goodman: Kris, thank you for joining us today. Let's start with three words. Can you give us three words to describe your current role?

Kris Singh: I would say interesting, challenging and creative. Interesting in the sense that every day there are new issues that come up that I haven't seen before. Challenging in that sometimes because there are new issues, it takes some looking into and trying to explore different avenues to try to tackle them. And creative, I would say because sometimes what's needed is a creative approach, something that's out of the ordinary, but seems to fit.

Susan Goodman: Can you give an example of the creative approach?

Kris Singh: Sure. Most recently we had a judge who had, I think, 20 cases with one inmate. The judge decided to recuse himself from all 20 cases, and so it came to me to try to find a judge to take them. That involved negotiating a trading of cases between judges to balance their caseloads.

Susan Goodman: Your previous position was also as a principal court attorney.

Kris Singh: Yes, I was a principal court attorney with Judge Aulisi. Besides working with Judge Aulisi, I was also assigned as a floating law clerk for any judge in the district that needed assistance. When I first started with the court system in 2003, I was a principal law clerk just to one Supreme Court judge.

Susan Goodman: Since we're doing this interview for the Diversity Workforce website, we really wanted to talk specifically, about diversity. So how would you define it?

Kris Singh: Diversity is everybody bringing together their own unique backgrounds and different perspectives. It's a collaboration that strengthens and enriches the atmosphere. I think the more backgrounds and viewpoints that we are all exposed to, it just makes us more knowledgeable, enriches our experience and broadens our outlook.

Susan Goodman: How do you encourage the uniqueness of each individual?

Kris Singh: I think for many people they have to feel comfortable and kind of own that part of who they are. Just being open about sharing their own perspectives with others... seeing things from a different viewpoint and accepting that other people's views may differ from their own...

Susan Goodman: How would you characterize what you like most about your job?

Kris Singh: It allows me to deal with so many different people throughout the district.

Kris Singh: As a principal law clerk you're in chambers every day and you're dealing just with the cases that that one judge has. Working for Judge Caruso in the administrative office, as well as taking cases, we're dealing with so many people throughout the district--judges, employees. For me, I'm a people person so that's something that I really enjoy.

Susan Goodman: Can you describe a typical day in your professional life?

Kris Singh: Well, as I said, Judge Caruso is the Administrative Judge, but he is also on the wheel for civil cases. A typical day, for me, is spent kind of juggling the workload between those two sides of things.

On the civil part of it, for the cases, quite a bit of time is spent going through daily mail, the motion papers that come in, going over issues that are raised with the judge, then drafting correspondence, working on decisions based on the way Judge Caruso wants these cases to be decided. That takes up a bulk of the civil part of it.

Kris Singh: On the administrative end, there are issues that get peppered throughout the day. You're playing ping pong, moving from cases to deal with some administrative issues. Those run the gamut...we get complaints from the public that need to be looked at, and we need to respond to each of those in writing. I review all the contracts that the fourth JD enters into. We negotiate the terms for those. Providing coverage for the judges if someone gets sick, or goes on vacation, or if a law clerk goes out on vacation... getting coverage for things like that.

We work with the judges in chambers and support magistrates when issues come up for standards and goals. And the judges, if they're running behind on something, they need some assistance, I try to coordinate with their chambers, offer any assistance. Some of our court attorney referees that are at large, we deploy them where needed. So, we monitor those assignments.

I'm on some task forces, interview panels, and then we also have a volunteer summer internship program that I administer. When I leave every evening, I try to leave a pile of what I'm going to be working on the next day. It seems that when I come in it's still...

Susan Goodman: In the pile?

Kris Singh: ... Yeah. It's just juggling really, that's what it comes down to.

Susan Goodman: Do you have anyone that you consider a mentor and, if so, why?

Kris Singh: I would say my boss, Judge Caruso. He's all about family, and considers the fourth JD as his court family. When I started working here, everything on the administrative end was new to me and I was often here late at night. He would often say *go home, you've got young kids at home. The work can wait.*

Kris Singh: In that respect, I think he was good in helping me achieve a good work-life balance. But, I would say aside from that, he's a mentor in the sense that he always urges me to get involved with a lot of different areas on an administrative level. To work with as many people as I can. Different initiatives or task forces statewide.

I'm grateful for that because it allows me to learn new things and he's very open and supportive of having his staff grow and pursue any opportunities that come up. He's also very good at dealing with people. I've learned a lot just by watching him when he has conferences and how he interacts with the attorneys and judges.

Susan Goodman: In what respect does he deal well with the different populations?

Kris Singh: I think he has a real knack for making people feel comfortable. Whether it's his superiors, or attorneys, or other judges, even when there are hard issues and he's got to get people onboard with a new initiative. He's good at explaining the rationale for what needs to be done, and ultimately getting people to see the benefit, even though it may be something they were initially resistant to.

Susan Goodman: How would you advise prospective applicants interested in working for the court system, or those who looking to rise within the ranks within the court system?

Kris Singh: Aside from, obviously, checking the court website, I think the best you could do to advance your career is to get as much out of your current position as possible.

Volunteer for as many opportunities as you can to allow you to learn and grow. I think if you really give it your all and you really try your best, that helps you not only personally, but professionally. I think when you've gotten as much out of your current position as you can, and you've put everything into it, your efforts will get recognized and you'll be ready to take that next step when the opportunity arises.

Susan Goodman: How about those who are on the outside right now? How would you encourage those people?

Kris Singh: I think for whatever position they're in now, if they are excelling in the position and learning as much as they can. They're expanding their skill set, which will make them more marketable for a job that comes up. I know from having sat on those interview panels, when we have called references to get their take on a potential applicant, their recommendations can really make a difference.

When we hear from an employer that this person goes above and beyond, I can always count on John to do 110 percent. ... they're the go-to person, that's really what you want to hear. I think the best thing people can do to help themselves get a future job with the state is to do a great job for where they are right now.

Susan Goodman: Before you leave this position, which hopefully will be quite a long time down the road, what would you like your greatest achievement to be?

Kris Singh: I would go back to that internship program. I'm very mindful of people who have given me my start in my legal career, or people who helped me get into the court system. When I started with Judge Caruso, there was no internship program for law school students. I think they had one years ago, but it went by the wayside because of budget cuts and there was no money to pay any interns.

I personally thought that there was value in it, even if it were a volunteer position that we couldn't pay for. So I went to Judge Caruso, he was all for it, and now it's been eight years that it's been running. Every year I canvas all the judges in the 11 counties who would like a law student as an intern. We post those positions. Every year we get so many students able to get some experience in an area of law they're interested in. Even though it's not paid, I think it's a valuable experience. If that helps someone to start them on their path, I think, for me that's a plus. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that.

Susan Goodman: That's a wonderful legacy, because you're actually training the future.

Kris Singh: The other thing I would say, too, is I'm on a lot of interview panels and sometimes I've had people that have applied for multiple positions but get discouraged because they haven't been selected in the past. If I'm walking these people into or out of the interviews, sometimes even an encouraging word or a reassurance that they did a good job goes a long way. Because even if they're not selected, hopefully they'll keep trying.

Susan Goodman: Your experience is invaluable for people who are in the court system and those who are thinking of coming into the court system. It's much appreciated.

Kris Singh: My pleasure.