

Diversity Dialogue Interview with Kris K. Singh

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System. I'm John Caher. This is the second installment of Diversity Dialogues. Amici is partnering with the Office of Workforce Diversity to bring you a series of interviews with Unified Court System staff of diverse backgrounds.

Today, Susan Goodman from the Office of Workforce Diversity interviews Kris K. Singh, Principal Court Attorney to Fourth District Administrative Judge Vito C. Caruso.

Susan Goodman: Okay. Kris, can you give us three words that you would use to describe your current role?

Kris Singh: I would say interesting, challenging and creative.

Susan Goodman: Can you elaborate on those three words a little bit?

Kris Singh: Interesting in the sense that it seems every day that 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, like 20 cases with one inmate. He got into a heated engagement with one of the defendants and said I'm going to need to recuse myself from all of these 20 cases.

And so, it came to me to try to find a judge to take all of those cases. But that necessarily involved some sort of a trade. Would you be willing to take these cases in exchange and you'll trade your cases?

That's just one example that happened recently. You try to be fair in trying to reallocate the cases when there are occasions when a judge does recuse.

Susan Goodman: Your previous position was also as a principle court attorney, correct?

Kris Singh: Yes, I was a principle court attorney. I am now with Judge Caruso-

... before then I was with Judge Alisi. So in that role with Judge Alisi was kind of as a floating law clerk.

I worked for any judge in the district that needed assistance. When I first started with the court system in 2002, it was as a principle law clerk just to one Supreme Court judge.

Susan Goodman: Okay. Since we're doing this for the Diversity Workforce website, we really wanted to kind of talk a little bit, specifically, about diversity. So how would you define diversity?

Kris Singh: In my mind I think diversity is everybody bringing together their own unique backgrounds and different perspectives. It's a collaboration of all of that coming together, which kind of strengthens and enriches the atmosphere. I think the more backgrounds and viewpoints that I'm exposed to, and that we are all exposed to, it just makes us more knowledgeable. It enriches your experience or broadens your perspectives or outlook.

Susan Goodman: How do you encourage people to honor the uniqueness of each individual? How do you get each person to bring out their best and their background as well?

Kris Singh: I think for many people they have to feel comfortable and kind of own that that's part of who they are, just being open about sharing their own perspectives with other people. For other people, I think it's important to be open to seeing things from a different viewpoint and accepting that other people's views may differ from our own...but to respect and be open to seeing things differently.

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

Kris Singh: I guess the part of it that I enjoy the most, which is different than other positions that I've had, is that it allows me to deal with so many different people throughout the district.

As a principle 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. 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 of juggling the workload between those two sides of things.

On the civil part of it, 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.

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 have to review all the contracts that the Fourth JD enters into. We negotiate the terms for that. Providing coverage for the judges if somebody 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.

: 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. Those things get kind of thrown off track. 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 do you consider that person a mentor?

Kris Singh: I would say my boss, Judge Caruso. He's all about family. He 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."

In that respect, 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. I've been grateful for that. He's also very good dealing with people. I've learned a lot just by watching him when he has conferences and how he interacts with the attorneys and how he gets things done, and with the judges as well.

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

Kris Singh: I think he has 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 someone to do something they really don't want. He's good at explaining the rationale for why he needs to do what he needs to do and it may not be what that person wants to hear.

The way he presents it and the way he is able to convey what needs to be done, I think is respected, and people may not like it but at the end of the day they can respect it. They can see where he's coming from and why it's necessary to do what needs to be done, what he's asking.

Susan Goodman: How would advise prospective applicants to the court system or those who are looking to rise within the ranks, within the court system?

Kris Singh: Aside from, obviously, checking the court website or for available tasks or openings, 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 then 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 they're in and learning as much as they can and making themselves as marketable as they can, they're expanding their skill set that can make them more marketable for a job that comes up. I know from having sat on these interview panels, when we have called for references from employers, or to get their take on a potential applicant.

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 you can do to get another job down the road with the state is to do a great job for where you are right now.

I think that'll serve you well, whether it's looking for a job with the state or anywhere else.

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 think. 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 know, for myself, when I was in law school, even when I was considering going to law school, I volunteered at a law firm or the Attorney General's office, just to get that experience and to see would I want to go to law school? Is this something I want to invest my time and interest in? And it was a volunteer position, but it was valuable to me because it solidified my interest in the law. Those contacts and experience that I gained there, for me, were instrumental later on getting a job.

I personally thought that there was value, 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 that's been running. Every year I canvas all of 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 that are able to get some experience in an area of law that they like, that 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 for me. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that.

Susan Goodman: Yeah. 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 and sometimes the position just isn't right for them and they can get discouraged. If I'm walking these people into the interviews or out of the interviews, I think sometimes even just an encouraging word or a reassurance that they did a good job goes a long way. Sometimes they appreciate that because even if they're not selected, hopefully they'll keep trying.

Susan Goodman: Is there anything else that you'd like to add, Kris?

Kris Singh: Not really, no.

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

Kris Singh: My pleasure. Thanks so much, Susan.

Susan Goodman: Thank you, Kris.

John Caher: Thanks for listening to Amici. You can find all of recent podcasts on the court system's website at www.nycourts.gov. Most are also in the iTunes podcast library. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, please let me know. I'm John Caher and I can be reached at 518-453-8669 or jcaher@nycourts.gov. In the meantime, stay tuned.