

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.

These are people who play a vital role in helping the court system achieve its goals and its mission. As always, the Amici podcast will be available both on the court system's website and through the iTunes podcast library. Additionally, Q & A articles based on these interviews will be available in the Office of Workforce Diversity webpage.

Today, Susan Goodman from the Office of Workforce Diversity interviews Kris K. Singh, principle 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 there are new issues that come up that I haven't seen before. Challenging in the respect that sometimes because they are new, obviously it takes some looking into and trying to explore different avenues to try to tackle those issues. And creative, I would say because sometimes it does need a creative approach, something that's out of the ordinary but would seem to fit.

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

Kris Singh: Sure. Recently we had a judge who had, I think, like 20 cases with one inmate. He got into a heated engagement with the defendants and he said, "I'm going to need to recuse from all of these 20 cases."

And so, it came to me to try to find a judge to take that, 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 and that judge who had recused would take them? 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 Aulisi as kind of a floating law clerk. I worked for any judge in

the district that needed assistance if their law clerk was out on maternity, was sick or things like that. 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. Now, 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 the atmosphere and enriches the atmosphere. I think the more backgrounds and viewpoints that I'm exposed to, and that people are exposed to, it just makes me more knowledgeable. I think 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 to 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 with that and kind of own that that's part of who they are. Just being open about sharing that with other people, their own perspectives. I think it's important to be open to seeing things from a different viewpoint and accepting that other people's views may be different than our own.

Susan Goodman: How would you characterize what you like most about your job, your current job? I know you've mentioned "interesting, challenging and creative."

Kris Singh: Aside from those three things, which are aspects of it, 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 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.

On the administrative end, you're playing ping pong, moving away from the cases to deal with some administrative issues. Those run that 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 Judicial District enters into. We negotiate the terms for that. Providing coverage for the judges if they've got a trial they have to ... Somebody gets sick, they have to go on vacation or a law clerk goes out on vacation getting coverage for things like that. Those are some of the things that take place on a daily basis.

We also have the fee dispute resolution program that we administer. So any time a client has a disagreement with their attorney with regard to the fee, we have a volunteer arbitration process. So we have a panel of arbitrators, so, managing that.

We work with the judges 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, I kind of monitor those assignments.

I'm on some task forces, interview panels, and then we also have a volunteer summer internship program that I administer.

It's kind of back and forth juggling. When I leave every evening, I try to leave a pile what I'm going to be working on the next day, the things that kind of got thrown off track. -

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. I don't know if you know Judge Caruso, but 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." 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, to work on 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 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. I've gained a lot just by watching him, actually.

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 gotta 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, you know, 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 for openings, I think the best you could do to advance your career is to get as much out of your current position, get as much out of it 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. My belief is that 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, those thinking of applying to the court system. 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 now and if you're learning as much as you can and making yourself as marketable as you can, you're expanding your skillset and making yourself marketable for a job that comes up. I know from having sat on these interview panels, when we have called for references from employers, 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 other employees go to, 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 had given me my start in a legal career, or people who help 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 we had budget cuts and there was no money to pay any interns.

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, was instrumental later on getting a job, things like that.

I personally thought that there was value in, even if it were a volunteer position that we couldn't pay for to get that started. 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 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.

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

Kris Singh: Yeah. Some people are set on criminal law, then they work with a judge for the summer and they think, this isn't it. I'm going to look for something else.

The other thing I would say 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: Your experience is invaluable, I think, 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 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.