



Profile: Susan Kang Gordon

Running her own firm at a young age – and her own life

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

Independence and work-life balance are premium goals within just about any profession and typically aren't easy to achieve before one logs decades of work and produces consistently successful results. Susan Kang Gordon was determined from the get-go to be the exception to that rule.

Gordon, a sole practitioner based in the East Bay, indeed managed to double-time it to such milestones as paying her proverbial dues, earning a partnership and then opening her own firm, all while keeping one eye on what so many lawyers yearn for: maintaining a quality of life.

Within five years of passing the bar and taking her first full-time job in law, Gordon managed to work her way up to a point where she felt ready to take charge of her career. That sequence of events began humbly when she answered an ad for a legal assistant at a personal-injury firm owned by an older gentleman who was nearing retirement.

"Within four months, I became an associate; then at the end of that year, I became partner. I really just took the reins," she recalled. "I was trying cases by the end of my first year. I was just learning without much guidance and kept doing that for five years, until about 2015, when I had children.

"That's when I paused and looked around," she continued, "and thought, here I am, I grew the firm, I'm doing the managing, I'm doing the actual work, I'm bringing in the clientele. There's a lot to learn, but I think I can do this (start her own firm). That was my decision after I had my children – to be more independent."

Gordon launched her own personal-injury firm, which at the time and under the circumstances wasn't easy. She had a newborn, she was working from home, and her priorities were spread "all



Kang Gordon

Today, her office is in Moraga, mainly as a means for optimizing her waking hours, which on good days consist of a little less time working and a little more time being a mother to her two children, ages 4 and 6.

"It's a long day, but it goes by quickly because I really do have these strong relationships with my clients," she said. "We truly care for each other, and that makes it feel less like work. I don't feel overworked at all; I feel like I have a very good balance."

An early lesson

Gordon's venture into law initially was sparked by an incident involving her father when she was 9 years old. He almost lost his leg in an accident and spent a year in intensive care. And while he wasn't the litigious type, he ultimately hired an attorney to help him through an ordeal that saw his family suffer financial hardships while he was incapacitated, Gordon said. Three years after the accident, he was awarded a monetary settlement. In her biography on her firm's website, she called it a leap of faith and said it changed her family's lives and future.

"We were really going through a hard time as new immigrants, with a new language, the cultural change, a lot of

over the place." But by the end of that first year, after taking many of her clients with her, Gordon ended up doing well enough to buy an office in Oakland's Jack London Square.

problems," she recalled. "In talking with my dad after the fact, he told me, 'Susan, I want to remind you when you represent people to treat them kindly.' The only thing he remembers about his attorney is he took him out to lunch, and they had hamburgers and French fries, and he just talked to him like he was a human being on his level. That really stood out in my father's mind, and now hearing him tell that story, it really stands out in my mind, doing contingency fee work. Whether it's the person under the bridge or an attorney, treat them the same way."

When she was a little older, another event occurred that had a hand in pushing her toward the law. Gordon attended the University of California, Santa Barbara for her undergraduate studies and while there clerked for an assistant district attorney who just happened to be working on the Michael Jackson trial. He served as a mentor of sorts and inspired Gordon to go to law school.

After graduating from UCSB, she took some time to travel and ended up applying to law school while she was overseas, she said, eventually landing at the University of San Francisco School of Law.

"During law school I clerked at a defense firm, and I didn't know if that was for me," she said. "But then I clerked in homicide for several assistant district attorneys in San Francisco, and I liked being in the courtroom. I thought to myself, I like what's going on here. I didn't like putting kids into jail, kids from the same geographic background as me; I had an issue with that.

"The main driver away from criminal law, though, was in 2010, there were no jobs," she continued. "They had one opening in the DA's office, and I was the top intern, being passed around by all the main homicide attorneys, doing the really



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hard work. And when the time came to give someone the position, they gave it to somebody from the mail room who was the cousin of a cousin or something. I thought, well, maybe this is a sign.”

Breaking through

Indeed, that may have been the pivotal moment when Gordon decided she had to take control of her career. Finding that first job as a legal assistant cracked open the door, and her ceaseless determination practically knocked it off its hinges. She learned the job by doing it, and climbed the ladder two rungs at a time to get where she is today.

Over the years, Gordon has broadened her range in the personal injury arena, doing mostly wrongful death cases, but also police use-of-force cases, vehicle collisions, premises liability and medical malpractice. More recently, about 30 to 40 percent of her practice consists of elder abuse cases – cluster actions or individual actions involving older adults or families of elderly victims, she said.

Along the way, Gordon has developed a somewhat novel approach to cases and trials. A common theme is her use of “demonstrative evidence,” meaning visual aids, in her opening, she said, including PowerPoint presentations, maps, timelines and more. She has been recruited by fellow plaintiffs’ attorneys to help their cases with such visuals.

“I think that part is effective. I don’t know how that’s going to happen with COVID, but I think it will translate in a similar way,” Gordon said. “The power of the visual image you just can’t replace with anything else.”

As she’s logged more cases and trials, Gordon’s style also has changed. She used to be more of an advocate and argue passionately to make her case, she said. But over time, she came to understand the advice of one of her more experienced colleagues.

“I had a mentor who taught me to let the people decide – present in a fact-based way, and don’t shove it down

REDIRECT

Getaway Spot: Anywhere along the coast, or Murphy’s

Go-To Music or Artist: Anything ‘90s R&B and Bossa Nova

Recommended Reading: “The Alchemist”

Dream Job: Cross-country coach or travel reporter

Words to Live By: “Regardless of where we come from, most people just want the dignity of being able to provide for the ones they love.”

their throats,” she said. “They’re smart enough. People are smart enough without being told what to do all the time. Let them make their own opinions.”

Figuring it out

There are times, however, the evidence is so good, she can’t help but make sure the jurors see it all and base their opinions on those facts. Those are cases in which she has to really make sure the visual presentation is effective. On the other hand, when she doesn’t have good facts, Gordon might surrender to her passion and push a little too hard.

“One medical-malpractice case I had where a man fell at Sutter Hospital, I think as a young attorney I was trying too hard to make a point that wasn’t there,” she recalled. “That part wasn’t lost on the jurors. I would stress different things, like I said he was a veteran, working in the commissary. Looking back, I would say where he worked, but not that he’s a veteran because I think it’s just pushing on a thing that isn’t there.”

Sometimes, what’s “not there” is key, as it was in Gordon’s first case after her first boss made her a partner. It was a horse-racing case involving juveniles who worked with the thoroughbreds at Golden Gate Fields. The venue used boys and girls, dubbed pony boys and girls, to walk the horses before the exercisers got them ready for the jockeys, Gordon explained. The track surface at Golden Gate Fields was made with what was called a synthetic

combination, essentially rubber, that would melt onto the horses’ hooves, and then when the horses came off the track and hit the gravel path, they would slip. In Gordon’s case, a pony girl was struck by a horse that slipped and suffered major injuries.

“My expert told me I needed to get a horse’s hoof,” she said, chuckling. “Well, I had a friend ... she had horses she got from the Bureau of Land Management. She called me up and said, ‘Susan, you can come up to Dixon and get a horse’s hoof.’ I said, ‘What do you mean? I can just saw off the horse’s hoof?’ She said, ‘Yeah.’

“So, I get a chainsaw, and I’m driving up to Dixon,” Gordon continues, “when I get a call from a farrier who says, ‘I have a freezer full of horses’ hooves; you can have as many as you like.’ We had to test the co-efficient of friction on that horse’s hoof. That case kind of sticks out in my mind in terms of the lengths that I would go.”

Distance runner

During the infrequent times she is not in the office or in court, Gordon enjoys distance running, a lifelong passion that she carried through high school as an athlete and into adulthood as a high school cross-country coach. She counts her own high school coach as one of her biggest influences, and in fact keeps in touch with him to this day.

“I just had a conversation with him last week; he calls and makes sure I’m living a quality life, doing my best,” she said. “I still run. I’m trying to do the best I can under the circumstances. I do speed workouts at the Miramonte (High School) track, and I do hill runs with some expert friends and some runs at Lafayette reservoir whenever I get the chance.”

Gordon is not shy about encouraging younger lawyers, and she oftentimes tells them to think about opening up a contingency-fee practice. Her peers in the plaintiff-law community are usually older than her, and she doesn’t see why it couldn’t be an opportunity earlier in one’s career.



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“Maybe not right out of law school, but a little bit down the road,” she said. “It just opens up a lot of doors, gives you a lot of independence, allows you to raise a family. More to women and younger people: Go into business for yourself, entertain the

idea of contingency-fee work. Because if I didn’t have my own business, and I wasn’t doing this kind of work, I couldn’t do the things that I do that have the most meaning to me. The balance I guess is what I’ve been striving for, and I don’t

know if that would have been an option if I was still working for someone else.”

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