Diversity in Practice

Diversity in law is a topic that has no one meaning. Do we mean diversity in ethnicity, race, geography, age, practice area? The lawyers profiled here represent the breadth of diversity in many of its meanings. Reading about their lives, though, reveals what we talk about when we talk about diversity: excellence and achievement. Their paths to success may vary, but their accomplishments in practice—and love for their work—demonstrate how they excel.

This month, also read a roundup of the current unsettled state of the law on affirmative action in law school admissions and a provocative piece that dissects some myths surrounding that admissions tool.

15 Alive and Kicking
Lisa Loo’s Fulfilled Law Practice

16 Life in a Fishbowl
Responsibility, Rewards and Mentorship

19 Bold Moves
One Lawyer’s Sustaining Practice

20 Learning on the Job
Litigator Loves the Diverse Caseload

22 Circuit Court Scrap
Affirmative Action Path Unclear to Law Schools

27 Myths and Facts About Affirmative Action

30 A Historic First
Asian American Conference Comes to Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN BECKETT
MAKEUP BY JULIE KOETH
Born in Macau and married to a Cambodian political refugee, Lisa Loo knows what it means to face diversity head on. Though she’s lived in the United States since she was 8, her life’s experiences have been full of interesting twists and turns.

She finds diversity at work, where she is the Associate General Counsel for Arizona State University. In that position, she handles a variety of cases. On any given day, she will negotiate contracts from real estate and development to procurement. She handles risk management matters and oversees immigration issues that pertain to many of ASU’s foreign instructors.

“I came to ASU because of the diversity,” Loo says. She spent years in firms where her colleagues were specialists, while she remained a generalist. She says it was frustrating at times, but her hard work paid off. She was precisely what ASU needed when she applied for the job eight years ago. Now she’s spinning the plates with her multifaceted caseload, and loving every minute of it.

Loo stays busy outside work too, where she makes it a priority to “give something back” to her community. She’s been involved with many civic groups, including the State Bar of Arizona’s Committee on Women and Minorities and the Arizona State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Loo is also an original board member of the Arizona Asian American Bar Association. She says her capacity as board member often means serving as a historical reminder to new members: “Our younger members are always enthusiastic and eager to get involved,” Loo says, “but they don’t always know why we do many of the things we do or why we have hurdles still to overcome.”

Before joining ASU’s legal team, Loo was with the firm Streich Lang in Phoenix. She worked as a corporate finance associate for five years, but she saw one problem: “I always wanted to be a mother,” Loo said. “If I wanted to see my children and have a quality relationship with them, I couldn’t keep going the way I was going.” That’s when ASU came along.

Her husband travels for business often, so Loo is the primary caregiver of their three young children. She doesn’t mind, though, because now she has the flexibility to attend a school play or her son’s karate practice. After the kids are tucked in, Loo finishes up important projects at home.

At a bar association seminar some years back, Loo spoke on the importance of balancing career and home. She gave simple advice: “Don’t be afraid to ask for help when your friends offer. Sometimes, as working mothers, we often feel afraid to ask, as if to show weakness. There’s nothing better than having a network of resources and support, so you can find happiness at work and home.”

Loo is pleased to say that she is a black belt in tae kwan do, and in those studies is where she met her husband. Though she has not been in the ring in years, she often uses those skills in the professional arena. “My husband taught me that when you are sparring, always look your opponent in the eye. You always learn something from people when you are not afraid to look them in the eye.”

Are there still challenges for professional women? Sometimes, says Loo, yes. She has been mistaken as a secretary once or twice, but she was too busy to worry about it. Looking back on her career, Loo knows that she has a knack for getting to the heart of matters, and she doesn’t have to play the “zero-sum” game—winning at all costs. For Loo, it’s about dealing in good faith so that all parties get what they desire.

A final bit of wisdom: “Let your strengths carry you. If I have a good roundhouse kick, I’m gonna stick with a roundhouse! I may not always win, but I’m okay as long as I stay in the ring.”
In 1995, Cecil Patterson, Jr. became Arizona’s first African American appellate court judge. It was the latest in a string of “firsts” that has kept him in the public eye for 30 years.

“It puts you in a fishbowl,” says Patterson, who still presides in the state court of appeals. “It’s difficult because you have to recognize who you are, to sit down and decide whether you can become the person who is the standard bearer, the role model, the mentor, the trailblazer. The person who—as bad as it may sound—will make it easier for those who follow, so they don’t have to cope with or climb over the same barriers that you had to.”

As a young man of color coming of age during the civil rights era, nearly everything that Patterson wanted to do would set him up to become one of the first, intended or not—law student, attorney, judge. More compelling than his history of firsts, though, is Patterson’s history of service in the profession and the community.

He earned his law degree from Arizona State University in 1971, and then worked on fellowship for a year as a staff attorney for the Maricopa County Legal Aid Society. That early work in the field helped mold Patterson’s view of the world—a view that began to take shape, he says, as a young boy working at his family’s laundry business.

“My dad’s laundry was located in a relatively impoverished neighborhood in the heart of the city in Newport News, Virginia,” says Patterson. “So I got exposed to a lot of activity, to everyday comings and goings, as I was growing up. That exposure to the lives of people who were less fortunate than I was helped foster an empathy that I still have today and a respect for the challenges that people face.”

Patterson tried his hand at private practice for a year, but he soon discovered that operating a business wasn’t what motivated him. He just wanted to practice law.

He went on to serve as legal counsel and housing discrimination attorney for the Phoenix Urban League and as a trial deputy in the Maricopa County Public Defender’s Office. In 1980, he became Arizona’s first African American superior court judge—a post Patterson applied for an unprecedented eight times before receiving the appointment.

“It was frustrating as all get-out, because I knew that I could do the work,” reflects Patterson, shaking his head and smiling. “But it was going to change the culture, and a lot of people weren’t ready for that or didn’t want that.”

With perseverance, Patterson overcame the barriers, as he had so many times in the past. And he found himself once again in an environment, in a culture, with which he was not only unfamiliar but also, at times, still somewhat unaccepted. “And that’s when you recognize that you’re in the fishbowl, and you will always be in the fishbowl,” he says.

Patterson has held numerous leadership and board positions in professional and community organizations, including the YMCA, United Way, Samaritan Health Services, Red Cross and NAACP. He has served the Arizona and Maricopa County bars and the American Bar Association, and most recently he was appointed chair of the ABA’s Judicial Council, an organization of 1,800 predominantly African American judges, justices and judicial officials. As a result of his involvement, Patterson has received numerous honors, including the City of Phoenix Martin Luther King Jr. “Living the Dream” Award, the National Association of Attorneys General Marvin Award, the Arizona Black Lawyers Association Trailblazer Award, and the ASU College of Law Distinguished Achievement Award.

Clearly, Patterson not only proved he could do the work; he proved he’s worthy of having been the first, the person who has made it a little easier for those who followed.

But at the heart of it all, and after all these years, he still just wants to practice law. Patterson’s greatest reward, he says, comes from mentoring the young lawyers who clerk in his office. “I like to help bring them along, to mold them. And out of that comes the satisfaction that I will be perpetuating something that means so incredibly much to me.”

Jessica McCann is a professional writer based in Scottsdale.
Consider how you would react: You have just been named a judge, a position toward which you have worked for years. You’ve hardly pounded your gavel when a lawyer approaches your clerk while in recess: He wants to see your diplomas to be sure you are, indeed, a Harvard-educated attorney, as had been reported.

And, oh yes, in the scenario you are the first and youngest Hispanic woman to be appointed to the Maricopa County bench.

If your first reaction is “Throw the bum out,” you are not on the same wavelength as Gloria Ybarra, who was appointed superior court judge at the tender age of 32. Instead, she laughs at the memory. Incidents like that just have to be confronted with good humor, Ybarra says. After all, there are bigger fish to fry.

And in Ybarra’s career, she has landed some big ones. She began her law career in 1978 working at a politically connected Phoenix firm. Eager for trial practice, she moved to the U.S. Attorney’s Office in 1980. As she says, “I was anxious to get going.”

All along, Ybarra knew she wanted to be a judge. In fact, she first applied to the Merit Selection Commission in 1983, when she had the minimum five years’ practice under her belt. Today, Ybarra says with a laugh, “I was a little bold.” It paid off: In 1985, she was appointed judge.

Speaking with Ybarra, you learn about her children—two sons and one daughter—and the integral roles they played in her work life. When she was appointed to the bench, she was pregnant with her daughter. “She went with me to the court for about five weeks,” says Ybarra. “There’s nothing like an oral argument to put a baby to sleep.”

She recalls her boys, then 4 and 2, remarking on the hall of judges’ portraits in the superior court. “Where are the lady judges?” they each asked, and she had to tell them that there had not been many.

Ybarra enjoyed being a judge, and she misses it. “I like making decisions. I feel like I’m good at that, well suited for it. I liked the variety.” And civil cases allowed her to indulge her lifelong love of learning: “The fun part was listening to expert witnesses. I have always liked knowing things about different occupations. You just learn a lot.”

Her decision to leave the job came after her sons’ comments revealed how much they missed having their lawyer–parents at home more often. She agonized over her decision but has no regrets, because it ultimately was very important for her children and for herself. “It certainly changed the course of my professional career. But in it there were opportunities to do other things.”

While at home, Ybarra was careful to keep involved with her profession. She served as a Bar Governor and as a judge pro tem. Then, in 1995, she was hired by Attorney General Grant Woods as his chief of the civil rights division.

In August 2000, she and Bruna Pedrini left the AG’s office to open their own firm, now named Ybarra Pedrini PLLC. They sought to spend their days in work they felt would sustain their spirits and the spirits of young people. They focus on civil rights, conflict resolution and mediation. They work with schools and municipalities to institute preventative measures to counter bullying and violent outbursts. She sees serious problems in schools, “issues of differences, issues of people feeling to be so different from each other that they self-segregate.”

Ybarra’s eagerness to learn is connected to a great fortune she feels in her life: her parents’ belief in the importance of education. Neither progressed beyond eighth grade, although both earned their GEDs. And they supported their children as they grew up in working-class downtown Phoenix and pursued higher learning. Her parents’ legacy is evident as Ybarra says what she would do if she had more time: “I would go back to school. I love history and would go back to do a degree in it” and to study women leaders. But that plan will wait in line behind her other bold endeavors.

Gloria Ybarra preaches what she practices. She mentors young women and has worked with the Hispanic Mother–Daughter Program at ASU, designed to aid eighth-grade girls and their moms. As she speaks of working one-on-one with the women, she recalls her years at Harvard Law as a young Hispanic woman: “It was not a particularly comfortable place to be.” She aims to make the halls of higher learning and professional life more comfortable places for these girls; after all, many of them may be as “anxious to get going” as she was.
Ever wonder what cows eat? Lonnie Williams Jr. knows. Want to see how a heart and lung machine works? Give Williams a call. And how, exactly, does electricity get from the power plant to your hair dryer? He could tell you that, too.

As a practicing attorney and partner at Snell & Wilmer in Phoenix, Williams learns about all sorts of things completely unrelated to the field of law. It’s one of the reasons he loves his job.

“Over the course of time,” says Williams, “I’ve had the benefit of learning a tremendous amount about a lot of different industries, and it’s fascinating. It never gets boring, because there is an aspect of learning to everything I do. It’s easier sometimes to learn the law than it is to learn what the deal is with your client’s particular issues.”

“For example, I did a case years ago regarding a byproduct of the cotton seed that cows eat, that actually can condemn the milk. So I learned what cows eat. … Of course, some things you don’t necessarily want to learn, but you do,” he laughs, adding that it was months before he could drink milk again after that case.

Williams earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Arizona with highest distinction in 1976, and then went on to Yale Law School to graduate in 1979. He accepted a position with Snell & Wilmer and was named a partner five years later. This made Williams the first African American to become a partner in a major Phoenix law firm. Nearly a decade later, he became the first African American to be elected president of the Maricopa County Bar Association.

“Those were real positives in my life, going back 10 to 15 years, because they were goals in a career path. And there hadn’t been any other African Americans in those positions, so if I was going to reach those goals, I had to be the first,” says Williams. “I have to admit, my answer would probably be different today if I was going to be the ‘first’ at something. It would be positive in the sense that it’s over, but negative in the sense that there are still areas—whether they be business, civic or social—that we’re still doing ‘the first.’ We should be past that.”

So, rather than setting his sights on being first, Williams simply throws himself into his work. And his enthusiasm is evident. You see it in his eyes and body language and hear it in his voice. He speaks of his work with a sincerity that only comes from truly loving what you do.

“I would absolutely love it if my kids went into law someday,” he beams, as his children’s portraits smile back at him from their prominent position on his office walls. “I think it’s a highly noble profession.”

Williams’ practice focused on medical malpractice law initially but has since expanded to include a wide range of civil litigation in commercial business and real estate. He has extensive trial experience representing clients in employment, commercial, tort, banking and condemnation/eminent domain disputes.

From the pleasure that comes with learning new things to the thrill of outmaneuvering an opponent, Williams thoroughly enjoys trying cases. But he also considers the skill set it takes to win those cases absolutely critical to one’s effectiveness as a lawyer.

“To effectively represent your client, the other side needs to know that, if necessary, you have the ability and the skill to take your case to a group of people you’ve never met—and you don’t know what they do, you don’t know what their prejudices are, you don’t know what their beliefs are—and convince them that what you are saying is more probably true than what the other side is saying,” says Williams. “That is the ultimate challenge.”

Jessica McCann is a professional writer based in Scottsdale.