

ATTORNEY OF THE YEAR (FINALIST)

CJ Griffin: 'Being a Lawyer Has Given Me a Voice'

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By Suzette Parmley

CJ Griffin's admirers say the Pashman Stein Walder Hayden partner, and executive director of the firm's Justice Gary S. Stein Public Interest Center that launched last October, is a ferocious fighter who has an uncanny ability to tackle complex legal issues and synthesize precise, effective advocacy.

"CJ's tenacious advocacy is not just limited to open, transparent government. She has been a champion and leader in the LGBTQ+ community and a voice for the voiceless among the downtrodden and disenfranchised, especially on issues of racial and ethnic justice," said attorney and colleague Thomas Prol, who has known Griffin since 2010. "As a civil liberties proponent, her passion and dedication to the rights of others has rewritten the state law books and opened up a path to a better world for all."

Added Pashman Stein managing partner Michael Stein: "CJ's passion for social justice and for leaving a mark on the policy issues of our day is a source of great pride to our law firm and the Stein Center, and, in my view, it is a gift to the citizenry of our state. She is thoughtful, she works hard and analytically, she is rock solid. But more than anything, she cares."

The 42-year old Attorney of the Year finalist has come a long way from the rural working class town of Osage City, Kansas—located 35 miles from Topeka, with a population of 2,500 and zero stop lights. It's where Griffin grew up "very poor," and a place that didn't provide role models or opportunity.

Griffin said the only lawyers she saw back then were those dressed



CJ Griffin

impeccably on the TV show, "LA Law," and "the only people that I knew that went to college were my teachers. College felt like a foreign world to me," she recalled. "Law school was never on my mind until later. I never conceived of it for myself."

Her views changed while taking a break from her undergraduate studies at SUNY-Empire State

College in Saratoga Springs, New York, and working full time in the city for Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, a non-profit group, from 2000-03, and later as executive director of Identity House, one of New York City's oldest LGBT organizations, from 2004-07.

"It was my first time around educated professionals and people," Griffin said. "People with money. It gave me the confidence to go back and finish my undergraduate degree."

Griffin was 29 when she enrolled at Rutgers Law School in Newark while living in Jersey City. Unlike her protracted undergraduate degree, she completed her J.D. on a three-year, full-time track in May 2009 without any financial or familial support.

"I have had to survive and do it all on my own," Griffin said.

Griffin gravitated toward a career in law that allowed her to advocate for those without the means or resources to represent themselves, protecting the constitutional rights of the accused and pushing constantly for social justice reforms.

"I can relate, and [that's] why I focus on social justice," Griffin said. "Being a lawyer has given me a voice. It is such a privilege. By understanding all the systems of government and your rights under the Constitution, you have the tools to advocate for yourself.

So many people don't have that and the ability to do that.

"That's why I have focused on pro bono work and also changing the law through litigation and advocacy work," Griffin said. "It promotes the public's interest."

Griffin started at Pashman Stein in November 2012, and last year was named executive director of the Justice Gary S. Stein Public Interest Center—named for the former New Jersey Supreme Court justice who is also general counsel at the firm.

The center focuses on cases that have a broad impact, and is focused primarily on providing amicus support to attorneys, or groups such as the ACLU of New Jersey and the Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers of New Jersey, among others, who have cases before the Appellate Division or state Supreme Court.

"My job is constant excitement. I'm really involved with impactful, cutting-edge and very intellectually challenging issues," Griffin said. "I feel like I'm living the dream. And I get to work closely with Justice Stein, whom, whenever I have a question on an issue, I realize he wrote the opinions."

The former Supreme Court jurist described Griffin as "one of the most gifted and inspirational attorneys I have encountered in my career."

"She not only is dedicated to ensuring that the law works to provide justice for the disadvantaged in our society, but is fiercely determined to making sure that happens," the elder Stein, who is Michael's father, said. "That determination is fueled by an intense work ethic that ... causes her to put all else aside to allow her to do the hard, detailed legal work that results in compelling, thoughtful and well-researched briefs that succeed in a high percentage of her cases."

Griffin said she originally wanted to be a public defender but quickly realized her hefty law school loans, and having a son to support, wouldn't allow it.

"That's one reason I was attracted to Pashman Stein. I wanted to do employment law—Pashman does both [plaintiff] and defense [work]—and the law firm salary would allow me to pay off those loans," Griffin said.

Prol, a partner at Sills Cummis & Gross in Newark and former president of the New Jersey State Bar Association, worked with Griffin at Scarinci Hollenbeck in Lyndhurst from 2010-12, and on the SBA amicus committee over the past decade, co-writing amicus briefs in support of the Anti-bullying Bill of Rights and marriage equality, and engaging in lobbying efforts to strengthen statutory civil rights protections.

“By CJ’s efforts on behalf of government records requestors over the past several years, the doors of the backrooms have been cast open, exposing the festering secrets that previously allowed what [former U.S. Supreme Court Associate] Justice Louis Brandeis called ‘the wickedness of people shielding wrongdoers and passing them off (or at least allowing them to pass themselves off) as honest men,’” said Prol.

Criminal defense attorney John Azzarello, former president of the ACDL-NJ and a partner at Whipple Azzarello in Morristown, said, “Anyone in the legal community who has crossed paths with CJ or had the pleasure of working with her knows that her reputation as a prolific legal writer and outstanding appellate advocate is more than well deserved. Simply stated, CJ can review a complex fact pattern and separate the wheat from the chaff. Her professional reputation as an outstanding appellate attorney may be surpassed only by her work ethic and commitment to eradicating social injustice.”

Griffin “accepted and worked on more amicus briefs in one year than many of us have ever worked on in our lifetimes,” Azzarello said. “CJ repeatedly told the ACDL last year to please refer

all criminal cases to her which could not be staffed with volunteers from the ACDL Amicus Committee. ... And for that, the ACDL and the criminal defense bar will forever be grateful.”

ACLU-NJ legal director Jeanne LoCicero, who has worked with Griffin for nearly seven years in her capacity as a pro bono cooperating attorney, said while Griffin is known as an expert on New Jersey transparency laws, her work on civil rights issues has been just as impressive.

“The ACLU-NJ and so many others have come to rely upon CJ for her outstanding legal skills, knowing that she is dedicated to making New Jersey a fairer, more just state,” LoCicero said.

Griffin has worked on more than 100 police transparency and reform cases. For several years, Pashman Stein, led by Griffin, litigated *North Jersey Media Group Inc. v. Lyndhurst*, in which the court held that use-of-force reports and names of officers in deadly shootings are public.

Griffin has been pushing to open police internal affairs files through Senate Bill 2656, sponsored by Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen: “Transparency is the first step to accountability because we’re able to identify the problems,” Griffin said. “We need

to see the records so we know what government is doing and actions that are being taken, and we can decide if we like those actions or not. It’s to prevent misconduct and corruption.”

She has advocated eliminating qualified immunity for police—which Griffin said “allows them to escape civil liability in excessive force cases.”

Griffin noted that “only about 40% or so of my work is pro bono,” and the Open Public Records Act does include a fee-shifting provision, which allows her to recover fees from the opposing party if she’s successful.

Libertarians v. State Police was such a case. The case was pending in the high court last year. It involved plaintiffs who sought the name of the trooper who they claimed engaged in “racially offensive behavior.”

“The state Attorney’s Office changed his position and gave us the [the officer’s] name, and paid us our attorney fees, so the case is now dismissed from the Supreme Court,” Griffin said. “We consider that a big victory, and the [police] unions are fighting the AG’s policy change to disclose the names of those who are disciplined, so we have another battle to fight.” ■