



# Hon. Karen S. Crawford

## U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District of California

by Ruth Dapper



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**W**alking into the light-filled chambers of Hon. Karen S. Crawford, U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District of California, visitors are greeted by a stunning view of the San Diego Bay and the city that has captured Judge Crawford's heart. Displayed throughout the chambers are various mementos and awards marking different stages in her career that led to her appointment to the federal bench. Observing the ease with which she carries out her judicial tasks, it's difficult to believe she ever served in any other role. In some ways, although she was appointed to the bench in March 2012, she has been preparing for this position—by being a problem-solver—her entire life.

Born in Queens, New York City, Judge Crawford was the middle of three children, with one older brother and one younger sister. As the middle child, she emerged as the consensus-builder early in life. At age 15, Judge Crawford's problem-solving skills were relied on even more heavily after her mother passed away. She became the matriarch of the family, assisting her hardworking father in the day-to-day life of the family.

As high school graduation approached, Judge Crawford decided to move to Boston to earn an art degree and pursue a career as an artist. Neither of her parents had attended college, and her father considered it vital that his children pursue higher education and achieve a marketable skill of some sort. As such, he encouraged her to become a dental hygienist. Judge Crawford, however, did not fulfill her father's plan, or her own goal of becoming an artist. She was selected into a specialized liberal arts program offered by Boston University that fostered collaboration skills and emphasized close professor-student interaction and small class sizes. She accepted the program's invitation and while participating with a team of fellow students in the program's final capstone project, she honed her innate consensus-building skills and came to the realization that she was well suited to pursue a career in law. When she told her father of her intention to become a lawyer, he was surprised. To have his child—his *daughter*—attend law school was



a concept that he had never considered. He nevertheless embraced and supported her decision fully.

Before applying to law school, Judge Crawford traveled from Boston to San Diego during February to visit her brother. When he greeted her at the airport in a convertible, she was instantly sold on the city. She thereafter applied to, and was accepted by, California Western School of Law. She jokes that, although the sun and palm trees influenced her decision to attend law school in San Diego, the next three years were spent studying in the law school library basement.

During law school, Judge Crawford was offered an internship with the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Diego and chose to be placed in the Civil Division. Her time in this office was formative, exposing her to substantively compelling and diverse cases filed against the United States in the San Diego District Court and all procedural aspects of litigation. John Neece, who was then the chief of the Civil Division, mentored her throughout her internship. His encouragement and her enthusiasm about the work prompted her to apply to the Department of Justice (DOJ) Attorney General's Honors Program during her last year in law school. She was offered a position and, in fall 1980,

joined the DOJ as a trial attorney in the Civil Division's Torts Branch in Washington, D.C.

For the next three years, Judge Crawford represented the United States in civil cases pending in district courts throughout the country. A large portion of her work was devoted to vaccine litigation, specifically swine flu litigation related to President Gerald Ford's Swine Flu Immunization Program of 1976.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the Swine Flu Act was to immunize every American against the virus, which was similar to a virus that had caused a pandemic in 1918.<sup>2</sup> Pursuant to the Swine Flu Act, common law tort actions against the vaccine manufacturers were barred, and an exclusive remedy for swine flu vaccine-related injuries was created against the United States under the Federal Tort Claims Act.<sup>3</sup> Following an increased incidence of adverse reactions reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, lawsuits against the United States commenced and were defended by the Torts Branch. Judge Crawford was assigned to represent the U.S. government in cases in California and other venues. As some of the first major mass tort litigation in the nation, the swine flu litigation enabled her to gain experience handling all aspects of national, multidistrict litigation (MDL). Importantly, her work as a DOJ trial attorney also provided her with exposure to judges and district courts nationwide.

Judge Crawford's DOJ work also brought her to various U.S. Attorney's Offices, which included returning to the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Diego. In late 1983, while visiting and preparing a pending swine flu case for trial, she learned about an opening in the Civil Division. She applied for the position, was hired, and returned to San Diego to begin her work as an assistant U.S. attorney (AUSA) in 1984.

Judge Crawford served in that position for eight years, in a work environment marked by strong mutual professional support, the expectation and production of high-quality work product, and daily interaction with the federal bench. While her trial and appellate practice expanded substantially to include a diverse array of constitutional and other matters, she continued to defend the government in swine flu and other vaccine-related litigation. She excelled in the position and was selected by the DOJ to receive the Director's Award for Superior Performance, putting her among the top 1 percent of AUSAs nationally. She comments that she had no idea at the time that numerous colleagues she had the privilege of working with at the U.S. attorney's office would eventually be her colleagues again—this time on the bench.

While working as an AUSA, Judge Crawford also participated as a barrister in the Louis M. Welsh Chapter of the American Inns of Court. The Inns of Court was, at that time, a new national organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of litigation skills by teaching lawyers, by example, the principles of ethics, civility, and professionalism in monthly hands-on meetings with members of the bench and bar. Judge William B. Enright, a founding member and then-president of the Welsh

Chapter, spoke frequently about the importance of his involvement in the Inns of Court "movement" as a way to give back to the legal community. The impact of the Inns's teachings, and the goals it embraced, resonated with Judge Crawford.

In addition to her professional pursuits, Judge Crawford also developed close friendships with her fellow AUSAs. One of those AUSAs and her husband invited Judge Crawford to their home for a "blind date" with a theoretical physicist, John David Crawford. The date went well, and after John David accepted a teaching position in the department of physics and astronomy at the University of Pittsburgh, they married in 1991, resulting in Judge Crawford's move to Pittsburgh.

While preparing for her move to a new legal community, Judge Crawford learned that there were no chapters of the American Inns of Court in western Pennsylvania. She discussed this with her longtime mentor, Judge Enright. His response to her plight: If there are no Inns, establish one.

Emboldened by this response, Judge Crawford set out to establish a new Inn following her move. She initially identified and met with leaders of the Pittsburgh legal community to evaluate whether there was a need for a chapter in the region. With unanimous support, she endeavored to organize the

Inn chapter, obtained the charter, and invited state and federal judges along with seasoned litigators and more junior members of the bar to participate. Her work led to the successful establishment of the Pittsburgh Chapter<sup>4</sup> of the American Inns of Court in 1992, of which she served as president for three years. During that time, she played an instrumental role in the formation of two more Inns in Pittsburgh and provided assistance and support during the creation of a fourth. As the Pittsburgh Inns flourished, Judge Crawford's involvement expanded when she was elected to the national American Inns of Court Foundation Board of Trustees, where she served as secretary for six years. Discussing her tenure on the board, she describes the individuals with whom she served as an "amazing and dedicated group of jurists and lawyers who were all committed to and worked tirelessly to achieve the same mutual goal—the enhancement of civility, ethics, and professionalism in the practice of law."

Her efforts and devotion to the Inns of Court did not go unnoticed by others. In 1998, Judge Crawford was selected by the American Inns of Court Foundation as the first woman to receive the A. Sherman Christensen

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Award—named in honor of the founder of the original Inns chapter and given annually to a member who has provided distinguished, exceptional, and significant leadership to the American Inns of Court movement. Surrounded by family and friends, she received the award from Justice Anthony Kennedy at the U.S. Supreme Court, where she gave her acceptance speech from the well of the courtroom.

Along with her work with the American Inns of Court, her litigation practice in Pittsburgh flourished, and she was named a shareholder at Buchanan Ingersoll P.C. (now known as Buchanan Ingersoll Rooney P.C.). Her practice expanded to include a broad range of commercial representation and service as counsel to an international latex glove company in defending products liability

MDL cases in the federal courts as well as state cases across the country.

Her family also grew, as she and John David welcomed two sons. When her husband passed away in 1998, Judge Crawford made the decision to move with her young sons back to California. She told the firm's management that she would be moving to San Diego and offered to establish a new office there. They agreed and, in 2001, Judge Crawford opened their first office west of the Mississippi.

Back in San Diego, Judge Crawford continued her active involvement with the Inns of Court. She was invited to rejoin the Louis M. Welsh Chapter as a master and

member of the executive committee. Soon after, Judge Crawford spearheaded with others the founding of a new Inn chapter in the North County region of the city, in which she also currently serves as a master. Years later, in 2014, she was selected as the president of the Welsh Chapter.

She continued her litigation work, eventually transitioning her practice to the law firm of Duane Morris LLP. A colleague, Patty Hollenbeck, who worked with Judge Crawford at both Buchanan Ingersoll and Duane Morris, recounts that she knew when Judge Crawford arrived at the office each morning because she could be heard greeting each person by name as she progressed down the hall toward her office. Hollenbeck describes Judge Crawford as dynamic, intelligent, warm, empathetic, and gracious. As an aside, she notes, Judge Crawford is a “great mom and just an all-around thoughtful, terrific person.”

After several years at Duane Morris, Judge Crawford decided to pursue a position in the federal judiciary. When questioned about what drew her to the bench, she cites her desire to try something new and serve others.

By 2012, she had been practicing law for more than 30 years, and pursuing a judicial position was a natural next step and a way to use her litigation and consensus-building skills. Moreover, having practiced in courts across the nation, she was consistently impressed by the high caliber of the Southern District of California bench.

In March 2012, she was appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California as a Magistrate Judge. Judge Crawford describes her entry to the bench as feeling “like coming home.” She now serves with numerous colleagues she formerly practiced with and district judges she appeared before for many years. She also joined her mentor, Judge Enright, whom Judge Crawford holds in highest regard and describes as “a wonderful man and superb jurist, who embodies all that the Inn of Court is about. He is our role model for how to fairly and respectfully dispense justice.” The admiration is mutual: Judge Enright describes Judge Crawford as having had “an outstanding, remarkable career in the law.” He continues, “I have the greatest respect for her impressive accomplishments with the American Inns of Court program. She single-handedly provided the moving force behind the establishment of several Inns in the Pittsburgh area. Through her inspired leadership, these Inns are some of the most vibrant, innovative, and influential in the nation. She is a galvanizing force in the Inns of Court movement itself.”

When asked what advice she would give junior attorneys, Judge Crawford advises them to zealously protect their reputations and to seek mentors who can provide support and guidance as they navigate through their legal careers. She also stresses the importance of giving back to others in the legal community by volunteering and mentoring more junior members of the bar. Finally, she advocates being open to opportunities and not letting fear or inertia prevent them from progressing.

Although Judge Crawford's career has led her to numerous locations, San Diego has continued to be the place to which she has returned. She describes the role of Magistrate Judge as her “perfect job.” Given her careful judgment, willingness to mentor, and enthusiastic engagement in her work, the San Diego legal community strongly agrees. ©

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>42 U.S.C. § 201.

<sup>2</sup>David J. Sencer, et al., *Reflections on the 1976 Swine Flu Vaccination Program*, 12 *Emerg. Infect. Dis.* 29 (Jan. 2006), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1201.051007>.

<sup>3</sup>28 U.S.C. §§ 1346, 2671, *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup>The Pittsburgh Chapter is now known as Hon. Amy Reynolds Hay Inn of Court, in honor and memory of Magistrate Judge Amy Reynolds Hay, a co-founder and inspirational member of this Inn chapter.

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