

OPPOSING COUNSEL: NAKESHA AND DAVID RUEGG

by Betty Fracisco

A Family Law Duo

One would have to call the Rueggs one of the “Dynamic Duos” of Riverside family law. It would be difficult to find a couple with a more interesting story. They have a long and varied history, and after two very hectic careers, they have made some critical choices and have settled into a life that brings them personal fulfillment and a sense of well-being. How many of us, as lawyers, can say that?

NaKeshia Steffler Dodson Ruegg (an Indian name bestowed by her father, her mother’s maiden name and her father’s surname, plus her married name) was born in Loma Linda and had a happy childhood in Riverside with her sister Tanisha. Her parents divorced when she was six years old, and her mother, iconic family law attorney Mary Swanson, went to law school and started a “general practice.” Her mother would bring her to the old family law courthouse on Brockton in Riverside. NaKeshia’s stepfather (from the age of nine or ten), Martin Swanson, had been a deputy public defender and then sworn in as a commissioner for Riverside County Superior Court and was assigned the dependency court.

NaKeshia attended Cornelia Connelly High School in Anaheim. It was at this point, at the age of 15, that NaKeshia met David Ruegg, a student at Servite High School, with whom she worked on a Servite theater production. They both laugh, remembering their “first date,” when his mother drove them to see the movie *Grease*. David, born in Fullerton, had grown up in Brea with four siblings in what he describes as a chaotic household, children of an information systems tech father who worked for LA County and a mother, who was a laboratory technician at St. Jude’s Hospital. After that date, NaKeshia and David attended one dance, but in David’s words, she was “too cool for him.”

NaKeshia graduated from Marquette University with a degree in communications, but at graduation was unsure of her future, so she took a year off, working for a family law attorney in Orange County. Her stepfather encouraged her to complete CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) training, and she actually completed three cases. This spurred her to take the LSAT and enter Chapman Law School. In the meantime, David had attended USC, graduating with a degree in business administration. He was really into computers (X-Box), but had no idea what he was going to do with his life. Mostly to avoid having to get a job, he



David and NaKeshia Ruegg

decided to attend law school at Chapman, coming back to Orange County to live at home.

David never enjoyed law school, and actually contemplated quitting after the first week. During law school, he worked summers at Richmond & Richmond (wills and trusts) and interned at the Public Defender’s Office. Lo and behold, when NaKeshia arrived at Chapman, they ran into each other and began dating in 2006. Unlike David, NaKeshia immersed herself in the law, getting involved in the Student Bar Association and working about 32 hours a week at the Herreman firm

in Temecula/Murrieta. They married in 2010, after both had passed the State Bar.

Their early careers are a sharp contrast. After taking the State Bar, David worked for a year with criminal defense attorney Correen Ferrentino, working on a Federal RICO case (gangland) in which they succeeded in getting 60 convictions. This was followed by two years with Giovanniello and Michels, a medical malpractice defense firm in Brea, where he reviewed medical records of nursing homes. Overall, none of his legal work was satisfying.

NaKeshia, on the other hand, jumped right into family law. She worked for Guy Herreman for six months and clerked at Swanson & Myers, where her mother, who had retired, was of counsel. Then she and her mother formed Swanson & Ruegg, as a way for NaKeshia to get started, although her mother was of counsel and would only step in full-time when NaKeshia was on maternity leave. After his initial attempts to find work that interested him, David started working with NaKeshia, whose practice was already starting to do well. He handled the “business side of the office,” and since “he was terrible at family law,” he handled subsidiary matters, including collections, landlord/tenant, and expungements. They had their first child in 2011, followed by children in 2013, 2015, and 2017. During the early years, NaKeshia was the main breadwinner, and at times David worked at home, and took care of their first two children. NaKeshia recalls that, although she remembers as a child hearing her mother dictating at 3:00 a.m., she was now putting in a full day in the office, coming home to her mom duties, then working from 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. at home. NaKeshia was very tired, especially since their second child was a special needs child. But, she loved her work.

Meanwhile, David, who was more attracted to analytical/computer matters than regular legal cases, became

interested in the challenge of QDROs, the bane of many a family law attorney. Mary Swanson suggested he network, so David sent out flyers to RCBA members announcing that he was going to be specializing in QDROs. Laura Rosauer was the first attorney who took a chance on him; and his unique practice gradually took off. He attended meetings in Orange, Los Angeles, and San Diego counties, listened to every available audiotape, and attended a QDRO conference, but was mostly self-taught in this technical area. Upland attorney Richard Muir, now his biggest competitor, helped him out. His mother-in-law sent him all her QDRO business. He and NaKesha did joint presentations in Orange and San Bernardino counties. In his first year in this new area, he handled three QDROs. Now he has 20 to 30 consults a week and has cases all over the state. He has become one of about 20 retirement benefits experts in California, in an area where pension plans are complex, especially military retirements with their constantly changing criteria and cut-off dates, about which he spoke in Long Beach recently.

Meanwhile, NaKesha's practice was ever thriving. However, she now had four children, age five and under, and despite much family support from both her and David's families, she decided she needed to pull back, so she could spend more time with her young children. With a special needs child, she had been attending a multi-hour class with that child right in the middle of her workday several days a week, which meant working at night to keep up. Something had to give. NaKesha and David discussed this even before she had her fourth child. NaKesha finally decided to take a leave of absence. She is wrapping up her ongoing cases, still consults on cases, makes court appearances several times a week, and is thinking about focusing on mediation, which would be a natural progression for her now. She likes to deal with people who can come to an honest agreement regarding how to deal with their children and who are willing to sit down and talk about it. She believes this has been a strength in her family law practice.

The Ruegg pendulum has swung and now David is the primary breadwinner, both are chairs of the RCBA Family Law Section, and they feel they have achieved a good balance and are happier overall. The beauty is that while NaKesha is spending more time with the children, she fully understands David's perspective and frustrations and finds it easier to appreciate the challenges of his work and the reason for his occasionally having to be at the office late, working on the "nice little boxes" that are now his unique analytical life in family law. The Rueggs' are in the process of opening a new office on Chicago in Riverside for both of them to use as a home base for meeting with clients.

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