



Sonia Russo and Matt Baca, executive director of Colorado Legal Services, who presented Sonia with the 2024 Outstanding Young Lawyer Award at the annual Bar Fellows dinner in October.

Russo may not have had the typical law school experience: “I loved law school so much that I cried tears of sadness at my law school graduation because law school was over. I think it’s fair to say that none of my classmates felt that way, and they were all extremely happy to be done with law school. Boston College Law School, where I went, at least at the time was called the Disneyland of law schools because it was the happiest place on earth, and that was very much my experience.”

Russo was very involved with student organizations at BC Law. She served as president of the South Asian Law Students Association, co-chaired the Law Students Association’s Diversity Committee, and competed on one of BC Law’s moot court teams, for which she had to earn a spot by going through the internal moot court competition. “I also participated in Northeastern University School of Law’s domestic violence interviewing program, which involved a six-hour shift in the emergency department at Boston Medical Center twice a month for a semester. We would ask patients who had suffered injuries because of domestic violence if they wanted resources to try to leave the dangerous situation they were in. The people who ran the program told us that if we could interview people in the emergency department of a hospital, we could interview anyone, and that’s definitely accurate. That program really opened my eyes to the scourge of domestic and intimate partner violence, and it influenced the rest of my career. I’ve spent the vast majority of my career trying to fight domestic violence, and a huge reason is because of the suffering that I saw at Boston Medical Center.”

She would also go on to work in BC Law’s criminal law clinic, serving as a student prosecutor during her 3L year. “What I tried to do in law school was essentially learn as much as I could about what being a prosecutor was actually like, and to also leave the door open to test other possible practice areas. I took secured transactions with probably the toughest secured

The Happiest Lawyer on Earth

The CBA’s 2024 Outstanding Young Lawyer
Sonia Russo Has an Infectious Attitude of Gratitude

BY HALEY HEMEN

The CBA’s 2024 Outstanding Young Lawyer, Sonia Russo, has joy in her work. “I truly love being a lawyer because I have the chance to advocate for what’s right, to keep my community safe, and to help people. Very few jobs allow those privileges, but every single morning when I wake up, I’m so grateful that I get to be a lawyer.”

It’s a profession she’s always been interested in, from growing up watching her lawyer father, John Russo, work hard for his clients (many of whom were in deportation proceedings and trying to get asylum), to taking a summer school course

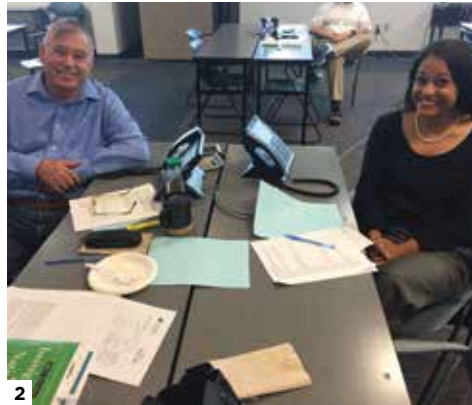
called “law and debate” that had a 10-year-old Russo participating in a mock trial based on the Rosenberg treason case. “My memory is that I was on the defense team for the Rosenbergs, and we convinced a jury to acquit them. I had so much fun in that class and enjoyed it so much—after that, I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. For me, the joy was in taking evidence that we had and using it to advocate for someone.” Her mother, Kusum Prabhakar, not a lawyer but a physician, was another major influence. Russo saw how incredibly hard her mother worked using her skills and knowledge to help others.



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1 Sonia with fellow ABA YLD Scholars Michael Nguyen, Shawn Hoover, Brooke Weitzman, and LaKeisha Randall at the 2017 ABA Midyear Meeting in Vancouver.
2 Sonia and her father John Russo volunteer at the State Bar of New Mexico's 2019 Law Day call-in event.
3 Sonia celebrates with her mother Kusum Prabhakar, husband Don McGinnis, and dog Milo after running the 2021 Colfax Marathon.

“One of my core values and motivations is that I am deeply happy, satisfied, and fulfilled by public service. I’ll always be grateful that I get to help people as part of my job.”

transactions professor in the country, and I also took corporations, which I loved. So I was trying to explore other paths, but in the end I kept gravitating back to public service. I’ve just always felt that it’s vitally important to help those who need it. My mom took us to India when we were children, and that was the first time I saw extreme poverty, and it was completely life changing. I knew I had to be in public service somehow, and it was later in my childhood that I started to think that being a prosecutor was one way to do that.”

Following law school, Russo went back to her native New Mexico to begin practicing law. “I was finishing the last of my clerkships in 2019, and I realized that if I wanted to leave New Mexico and try living somewhere else long term, I needed to do it then. I considered cities other than Denver, but my criteria were that it needed to have a nonstop flight back to Albuquerque, where both of my parents were at the time, and it needed to have a vibrant arts scene. Denver just made the most sense.”

Eager to test herself in a larger community, which was how Denver felt compared to Albuquerque, Russo applied to the Colorado Department of Law. “I was very lucky that my first supervisor at the Colorado DOL hired me. He could have hired literally anyone else who was already licensed in Colorado, but he took a chance on me as an out-of-state candidate. My

first job at DOL was in the Colorado Medicaid Fraud Control Unit. That position drew me in because it was an opportunity to work on some really complex civil and criminal cases, to try to protect state resources from fraud and to protect vulnerable elderly people. My work in the Colorado Medicaid Fraud Control Unit certainly involved all of that, and I loved the work. Then I was lucky to transition to the Criminal Appeals Section, where I get to be an appellate nerd all day every day, which is a dream.”

Russo moved to Colorado, and seven months later, the world seemed to shut down with the COVID-19 pandemic. “The pandemic was a life-changing event. It was terribly isolating. Now, looking back on it, I truly feel that I can handle just about anything life throws at me because of my experience making it through the pandemic. The pandemic also encouraged

me to get really clear on my priorities and how I spent my time. I launched a podcast for the American Bar Association during the pandemic, and that was an amazing experience, but when my dad got sick in 2022 I had to be honest with myself about having finite time. I've always been a person who thinks that if I just work harder and faster, I can always make time for anything I want to do, but the pandemic taught me that downtime is important too."

Russo seems to be quite successful in achieving a healthy balance and satisfaction in her life. "A huge part of that is having been in public service almost my entire career. One of my core values and motivations is that I am deeply happy, satisfied, and fulfilled by public service. I'll always be grateful that I get to help people as part of my job. I think right now I've managed to have a good work-life balance, but I'm also sure that'll change as I continue

to progress in my career, and that's okay too! Different seasons of life require different things from us, and luckily right now I happen to be in a season where I can take time off to get married, for example, and to take care of my dad."

In what downtime she gets, Russo enjoys spending time with friends and family, concerts of all kinds, and the Museum of Contemporary Art's quarterly exhibits (which she considers a must see). Her dog, Milo, is also a great source of enjoyment. "I love taking him for walks! Milo's perspective on things is so great. No matter how many times he goes on the same walk, every single time he finds something new or interesting to get super excited about. I honestly try to live my life like that too."

This is echoed in Russo's approach to practicing law. "I always start with an open curiosity about any case that I'm working on. That also means understanding that sometimes

I don't know what I don't know—I'm lucky to have excellent colleagues to consult with in those moments. I approach every case with that combination of curiosity and humility."

In addition to bringing this openness to her work, Russo also helps cultivate a civil, respectful atmosphere wherever she finds herself professionally, something she learned from many mentors she's had throughout her career. "One lesson that has guided me throughout my career was something I learned in law school: any legal community you join is small, and you have to safeguard your reputation as much as possible. What that's meant for me is that I always try to be as civil as possible with opposing counsel, because you gain nothing by being hostile and uncivil, and my ethical compass always guides me. I've learned that lesson from every mentor who's been kind enough to invest time and energy in me."

Thinking ahead to her future career goals, Russo says, "I want to always learn, grow, and progress. I want to continue challenging myself with complex cases and cultivating different skill sets for different kinds of work. My long-term, pie-in-the-sky dream has always been to be a judge, but I am aware that it's very difficult to do and it may not happen for me. And that's okay! As long as I'm always learning and progressing, I'll be happy in my career no matter what I'm doing." **CL**

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