

## SEJAL H. PATEL

By Matt Yas

“Goal-oriented” is a seldom-criticized quality in a future lawyer. A future noble and magistrate with a clear-cut destination in mind is most often perceived as driven, focused and mature.

Considering her legal beginnings, Sejal H. Patel’s more recent successes easily could be seen as the logical fulfillment of just such a goal-oriented, singularly focused attorney.

Not surprisingly for an improvisation artist, however, that simply was not the case.

While a student at Northwestern Law School, Patel worked with the Center on Wrongful Convictions representing state and federal death-row inmates in the appellate process.

A decade later, she took up the highly publicized case of Guy Randolph, an indigent mentally ill man who was wrongfully convicted of indecent assault and battery of a child. Randolph served 10 years in jail and was classified as a high-risk sex offender for another seven.

Patel was able to get Randolph exonerated by proving that the child victim had misidentified him. She subsequently sued the state over the wrongful conviction, obtaining the maximum statutory award of \$500,000, and partnered with Ropes & Gray to create a special trust for her client.

As for the result, she never had a doubt.

“I knew we’d win from the day I got the file,” Patel recalls. “[The case] had just been forgotten. The work was in assembling everything; tapes had been destroyed, medical records were lost. It took going through eight or nine lawyers for someone to do something about it.”

But the path that brought Patel from Northwestern to the Randolph case was hardly linear. She relished her time as a prosecutor in the nation’s capital, where she served as a U.S. Department of Justice attorney in the Fraud Section, receiving a DOJ Meritorious Award in the process. She also was selected for a stint as a special assistant U.S. attorney in Washington, D.C.

“I loved it,” she says. “In many ways, it was much more empowering than being a defense attorney.”

It was only when her husband landed a new job in Boston that Patel made her way, with their 5-month old in tow, to Massachusetts. It was far from the fulfillment of a master plan.

“It was fate,” she says. “When I first arrived here, I found it to be an unfriendly professional environment for someone like me, with no affiliations. So coming in new, I just followed my heart back to [wrongful convictions].”

After the Randolph exoneration, Patel served on a 20-member Boston Bar Association Task Force in 2009 that the BBA called “the broadest group of major players in the criminal justice system ever assembled to prevent wrongful convictions in the Bay State.”

Considering her circuitous path to renowned restorer of damaged justice, it is no surprise that one of her key pieces of advice, which she imparts to students in her role as a career adviser at Harvard Law School, is to embrace improvisation while refining your goals.

“You have to accept that there’s going to be a lot of improv,” she says. “Having a goal is great, but you better make sure that, in the years you spend getting there, you do what you love. You have to let it come to you.”

**“You have to accept that there’s going to be a lot of improv.”**

AGE: 34

GRADUATED: Northwestern University Law School, 2000

POSITION: Sole practitioner, Boston

One thing about her that might surprise people: “I choreograph ‘Gorefest’ every Halloween for the Improv Theater in Boston and Cambridge.”



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