Patty Ferguson-Bohnee honored for her service

By Bobette Herrmann
TODAY'S CORRESPONDENT

When Patty Ferguson-Bohnee assumed the role of Indian Legal Clinic director at Arizona State University's Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law in 2007, she wasted no time diving into legal issues facing the Native community.

Her tireless work as the Native Vote Election Protection coordinator during the presidential campaign of 2008, and role as co-founder and vice president of the Native American Bar Association of Arizona, didn't go unnoticed by her peers. She was honored at the Seven Generations Awards Dinner Sept. 26.

She also won the Equal Justice Works Award for Outstanding Law School Faculty in October. Acclolade recipients are college faculty with less than five years of experience teaching who are making strides in public service.

Ferguson-Bohnee, a member of the Pointe-a-Chien Indian Tribe of Louisiana, spearheaded the voter protection initiative when she learned that none of the political parties or other election protection organizations were going to provide services to Native voters on Arizona's Indian reservations.

She also partnered with the Inter-tribal Council of Arizona and the Arizona Indian Gaming Association to identify the areas that needed the most help. Community members, attorneys and law students volunteered for the cause when Election Day came.

They set up a hotline to field calls for concerns, and volunteers manned polling places to provide assistance to voters in need. "It was a very multi-layered approach," Ferguson-Bohnee said.

She explained that Natives who lacked a street address ran into the most issues when they showed up to vote. Volunteers came to their aid and helped them overcome the confusion so they could vote.

"There were a lot of people that voted that would have otherwise not voted if they didn't have access to the hotline or volunteers," she said.

In April, she testified at the U.S. House Subcommittee on Elections, "The 2008 Election: A look back on what went right and wrong."

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As a tireless advocate for Indian country she has testified before the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on several occasions. In November 2009, she testified at an oversight hearing on fixing the federal acknowledgment process. Her students had worked on preparing the testimony and attended the hearing with her.

In September 2009, the clinic filed an amicus brief prepared by students in the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on behalf of the Lipan Apache Indian Tribe of Texas. The Needville School District suspended a Lipan Apache kindergarten boy for wearing his hair in braids, which a lower court said violated the student's constitutional rights of freedom of expression and religion, but the school district filed an appeal to the high court.

Prior to starting her tenure at the clinic, she was an associate of counsel for Sack Turney. While there, she appeared before the Louisiana State Legislature and assisted four Louisiana tribes, including her own, in obtaining state recognition. "If the tribes would have not been recognized the schools would have lost their federal Indian education money," she said.

All four tribes are in the process of pursuing federal recognition.

Ferguson-Bohnee grew up north of Baton Rouge, La., and routinely visited her reservation as a child. It was her tribe's status that spurred her decision to go into law.

"I wasn't a member of a federally recognized tribe, and that was something that prompted me to investigate. I decided that the best thing I could do to help my people was to go into law."

Other notable work at Sacks Turney include her work with the Navajo Nation to invalidate the Arizona voter identification requirement, and negotiating changes with the Arizona Real Estate Department's Public Disclosure Report to include tribal provisions.

The Indian Legal Clinic gives students hands-on experience in the practice of Indian law. They are required to work 20 hours a week on law projects, and dedicate three hours each week to their clinic work, which consists of attending tribal court hearings.

The clinic is a win-win situation for her, as students are able to practice law under her bar license, and she gets to practice law and teach at the same time. There are currently six students enrolled in the program, in addition to a former student turned mentor.

Kate Rosier, director of the Indian Legal Program, lauds Ferguson-Bohnee for making practicing law interesting and fun for the students. "She has really given them a wide range of cases to really show them what it's like to be an Indian law attorney."

Ferguson-Bohnee earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with honors in Native American studies with an emphasis in policy and law in 1997. The fluent French speaker also spent one quarter at the Stanford campus in Paris, France. As a Fulbright Scholar, she attended the Université de Paris VII, Paris, France in 1997 - 98 where she dove into research on French colonial relations with Louisiana Indians during the 17th and 18th centuries.

She earned her Juris Doctorate from the Columbia University School of Law in 2001.

For more information on the Indian Legal Clinic, visit www.law.asu.edu.