

Taking social causes to court

■ *Being told she couldn't become a lawyer stoked Hala Gores' determination*

By SAUNDRA SORENSON
The Times

Hala Gores recalls how a moment of middle school defiance strengthened her desire to practice law.

Gores, who had immigrated with her family from Palestine and landed in St. Helens when she was 10, told her guidance counselor she wanted to be a lawyer.

"She said to me, 'That takes too long, it's too many years, it's too expensive. So why don't you consider being a legal assistant or a legal secretary?'" Gores recalls. "She really tried hard to convince me that was not my path, but I left that meeting thinking I had prevailed.

"Two, three days later, my parents get a form letter, saying, 'I met with your daughter, and she has decided to become a legal assistant.'"

It was the 1970s, and Gores doubts the guidance counselor would have asked the same of a male student, or of a student who wasn't a minority. Still, it helped her prepare herself for a notoriously combative field.

"I can see the guidance counselor's face as if I saw her yesterday," Gores says. "That was something that was really a turning point for me, was getting that letter — 'No, you can't.'"

Lifelong dream

Gores had long been attracted to the idea of standing up for people.

"It was always in me as a child to be a protector," she says.

After attending Portland State University, she went to law school at Lewis & Clark College then began her law career working at the public defender's office.

"I've always wanted to help people with whatever their problems are," Gores says. "These stories would walk in the door, and we'd jointly find a solution."

She decided to specialize in personal injury law, and says that on average, 20 to 25 percent of her case load is pro bono.

"I know plenty of lawyers who do a lot of pro bono work, and it's all quiet," Gores says. "People don't hear about it — big firms give back, small firms give back."

Compelling causes

She is currently representing the estate of

Jenee Hammel, a 26-year-old mother and one of two women killed in April 2010, when TriMet bus driver Sandi Day made an illegal left-hand turn in downtown Portland and struck a group of five pedestrians who had the right-of-way in a crosswalk. Day was found at fault in February 2011, and sentenced to 200 hours of community service and required to pay a nominal fine.

But Gores feels that the sentencing did nothing to correct weaknesses in TriMet training, nor to correct what she found to be faulty bus design that presents significant visual barriers for drivers.

"We decided that we would focus on making our community safer by filing a lawsuit against the bus manufacturer," Gores says, adding that this is a wide-ranging problem for buses that are operated nationwide. "To me, the TriMet case is not a case, it is a cause."

Extracurricular activities

Gores stepped into the role of president of the Oregon Trial Lawyers Association in August, and had the rather unexpected pleasure of joining Oregon Medical Association President Bud Pierce to testify in favor of Senate Bill 483. SB 483 gives patients, medical practitioners and hospitals the option of legal mediation to address charges of medical malpractice, and was signed by Gov. John Kitzhaber on March 18.

Gores knows that trial lawyers and medical industry professionals are not natural bedfellows, and the opportunity to join Pierce delighted her.

"I said to Bud, 'Hey, let's freak them out. Let's go up there hand in hand.' He's a gentleman in his 60s, and there we were, holding hands and walking up to testify," Gores laughs.

Gores, who has practiced law for 24 years, is also a founding member of the Arab American Cultural Center of Oregon, and serving on its board has allowed her to focus on her own culture and heritage. Volunteering with the organization is often a welcome change of focus from a workload which often addresses some form of personal tragedy.

"I'll meet with a family that lost a young child in a car crash, and I just cannot get home fast enough," Gores says. "I'll take the afternoon off and hug my child."



Hala Gores has practiced law for 24 years and is the current president of the Oregon Trial Lawyers Association.
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