

NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

Meet Ellie Roohani:

Integrity, Fairness, and Justice Guide Roohani's Path

BY MARY BACON, ESQ.

As a 1-year-old child, Ellie Roohani and her family moved to the U.S. to flee religious persecution in Iran. Staying in Iran was not an option. Her family practiced the Bahá'í faith, and the new regime actively imprisoned and killed Bahá'ís. If her parents had stayed in Iran, Roohani would never be recognized as an equal, unable to attend school or hold a job. Her marriage would not be recognized, and she would not be able to be buried according to her faith. Immigrating to America meant Roohani would be able to forge her own path, following her parents' "north star" by pursuing public service.

In Iran and Pakistan, her mother was a physician, and her father was a civil engineer and architect. While their professional credentials did not transfer to the U.S., moving was worth every trouble. They treasured America from the beginning—America was a country with ideals and laws enacted with the noble goal of protecting everyone. Her parents' perspective on America stuck with Roohani, and she soon adopted it as her own.



Educated in Nevada's public school system, Roohani stayed close to home and attended college at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Multiple scholarship offers ensured Roohani remained at UNLV for law school. Hard work kept Roohani at the top of her class. She was on the Dean's List, served as editor-in-chief of the Nevada Law Journal, and interned with Nevada federal court Judge Philip Pro and the Las Vegas City Attorney's Office. She also won first place for her oral advocacy at the Clark County Moot Court Competition and received recognition as Student of the Year through the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada for her commitment to community service.

After graduation, Roohani committed herself to public service. She taught advanced legal analysis and bar exam preparation at the William S. Boyd School of Law. (She later taught judicial writing at Boyd in the top legal writing program in the country while also clerking.) Then, she served as a law clerk to Nevada federal court Judge Roger Hunt and Ninth Circuit Judge Johnnie Rawlinson.

"I learned how to be a lawyer in federal court, and I learned from the best," Roohani said, fondly remembering her first years on the job.

After clerking, Roohani served as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Criminal Trial Division, prosecuting child sexual exploitation and other violent crime cases. She also defended convictions in the Appellate Division.

"Seeking justice for child victims was a difficult and often heart-wrenching process, but looking back, I

wouldn't trade that experience for the world," Roohani said. "There is no doubt that when part of your job is wiping tears and providing support to a victim in their most vulnerable moments and on their most difficult days, it changes you as a person for the better."

In 2021, the Judicial Selection Committee, headed by then-chief justice of the Nevada Supreme Court James Hardesty, forwarded Roohani's name for consideration to Governor Steve Sisolak. Governor Sisolak appointed Roohani to serve as a judge in Department 11 of the Eighth Judicial District Court.

"As a judge, the law was my compass, and when it commanded a certain result, I followed it due north," Roohani said. "But, when I had discretion, I learned that I could always do a little more and be a little more – more patient, more giving, more forgiving, and more thoughtful. I treated lawyers and litigants in my courtroom with respect and kindness with the hope that they would treat each other with civility. I was open-minded and listened extra carefully to any person I disagreed with to try and come to the right decision. I put in the time to learn about and prepare for every single case because every case is important."

Roohani's efforts paid off – for the time she spent on the bench, she had a 100 percent judicial affirmance rate and earned a reputation of being "fair but firm."

"Ellie brought her impressive talents to the bench as a state court judge," Judge Johnnie B. Rawlinson said. "She earned an excellent reputation as a competent and evenhanded jurist, and I fully expect to see her on the bench again in the future."

For her part, Roohani said: "Although things did not turn out as I had hoped, my commitment to serving the public remains steadfast and unwavering. The values that guided me as a judge—integrity, fairness, and justice—continue to be the cornerstone of my dedication to our community."

Today, Roohani works for Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada as the Human Trafficking Survivors' Rights Attorney. Drawing on her experience and the relationships she built as a former federal prosecutor and state court judge, she feels special purpose and passion working with victims of crime in helping them rebuild their lives through The Resiliency & Justice Center—a multi-agency resource dedicated to healing and support in Nevada.

"Ellie joined Legal Aid Center after serving as a respected state court judge. Her compassion and dedication to serving clients—especially those impacted by crime—has ensured that our clients receive the support they need while dealing with a crisis," said Barbara Buckley, executive director of the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada. "She is uniquely qualified in her efforts to focus on innovative ways to help survivors of human trafficking. We are beyond excited to have her join our efforts to change the landscape of victim services."

"From my perspective, the single most impressive thing about Ellie is her eagerness to impart her considerable skills and abilities to students and less-experienced practitioners," Rawlinson said. "She has a gift of making complex subjects understandable

and encouraging others to strive for continued improvement."

Aside from teaching and mentoring lawyers and future lawyers, Roohani also volunteers with multiple non-profit organizations that build relationships with and mentor young people to further invest into the community that gave so much to her.

"This community raised me. Teachers, mentors, and community leaders gave me their time and kindness without any indication I would ever be able to repay the favor," Roohani said. "God has blessed me with the capacity to love and be helpful. And I love giving those gifts back to Nevada."

This year, Roohani made the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada's 300 Hour Pro Bono Club. When asked how she "has time" for so much pro bono work in addition to her day job, she humbly responded with a Bahá'í value: "'Where there is love, nothing is too much trouble and there is always time.' If I am able to use my ability, skill, and time to help someone who has to bear a heavier load than me, how could I not?"

For Roohani, only one thing comes before her love for the state of Nevada.

"My only true passion before serving this community and the rule of law is my family," she said. "I am a mother, wife, and daughter before anything else. I always tell people that you need to remember that you are a human being before you are a lawyer; you are a community servant before you are a lawyer. I hope my daughters learn that it is their humanity that makes them strong."

In her spare time, Roohani loves making crafts (or rather half-completing a multitude of crafts) and is a foodie. She loves entertaining and cooking things that look delicious on TikTok for her family and friends.

Ellie Roohani and her family having fun in London.



Ellie Roohani (center) is congratulated by her Leadership Las Vegas friends – Eman Epino (left), Nikki Tatalovich, retired Colonel Kelii Chock, and Marcus Lidey – the morning she was sworn into the state court bench by Judge Cristina Silva.



Judge Johnnie Rawlinson (left), Traci Rawlinson, and Ellie Roohani at the 2022 state bar conference.



Ellie Roohani reads one of her favorite books to preschoolers during Nevada Reading Week.



Ellie Roohani (center) and her best friends – Leslie Nino Piro and Dr. Tina Kwan – enjoy the 2023 LVNBA "Soul Train" Scholarship Gala wearing disco glam.