

## NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

# Meet Doreen Spears Hartwell

Instead of Being First, Firm Owner  
Wants to Leave “Tracks”

BY MARY BACON, ESQ.

**After more than 23 years of practicing law, Doreen Spears Hartwell has achieved a few “firsts” in the legal community. While discussing her historic firsts, she was quick to point out she never had a desire to get anywhere first. She only sought to make the world a little easier to navigate for the next generation of attorneys.**

As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg said, Hartwell simply wanted to leave “tracks.” Some of her historic accomplishments include being the first African American female partner at Nevada’s then-largest law firm, Lionel, Sawyer & Collins—and the first African American to become chair of the Ninth Circuit Lawyer Representative Coordinating Committee for the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (LRCC). As the longest-ever serving chair of the LRCC, her most memorable experience was the opportunity to interview U.S. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade*.

Hartwell grew up with her parents and six sisters in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Her father, who passed away in

2003, was a sheet metal foreman. Her mother stayed at home until her youngest sister was school age. Her mother then became a Head Start preschool teacher, eventually retiring in 2017 as director of the program.

Hartwell was a natural athlete and loved playing sports. She played volleyball, basketball, and softball in high school. She mentioned taking the bus with her older sisters to dance class and smiled while fondly remembering those trips.

“We would often walk home from dance and use the 35-cent bus fare and get a McDonald’s hamburger and French fries instead,” she said. Hartwell and her sisters still joke as adults about how they felt “rich” growing up.

Hartwell has fun memories of family vacations driving south to West Virginia or north to Montreal in the family’s yellow-and-brown station wagon. She recalls ice skating at Rockefeller Center and attending the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade in New York City. She spent many summer days at Pleasure Beach, where her father taught her how to swim.

Always one to carry a book in her bag, she also spent many hours immersed in historical fiction, romance, and mystery novels. Growing up, Hartwell envisioned herself as a freelance journalist traveling around the world, writing about her adventures. She was a regular contributor to her high school newspaper and was very active in both clubs and sports. She was the president of the National Honor Society, on the yearbook staff, and a member of the Future



Business Leaders of America. During her senior year, she was the captain of the volleyball, basketball, and softball teams. Once she turned 16, she spent many weekends working at McDonald's when not attending a sporting event. With her natural curiosity and disciplined work ethic, it is no surprise that she earned straight As and was her high school's valedictorian.

Hartwell attended Fairfield University, a small Jesuit university close to home, on a full scholarship. She was one of three freshmen on Fairfield's inaugural NCAA Division I volleyball team. She was named all-conference her sophomore and junior years. She also studied abroad in Sevilla, Spain, during the spring semester of her junior year. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in English and minoring in Spanish.

Hartwell was the first in her immediate family to earn a bachelor's degree. After graduation, she celebrated by spending a couple of months backpacking through Europe.

Her next stop was Sacramento, California, to establish residency in California with the goal of obtaining a master's in journalism at UC Berkeley. She worked in advertising at the *Sacramento Bee* considering the friends she made as "family."

Hartwell's decision to attend law school was a fluke. After seven years at the *Bee*, Hartwell decided it was time to pursue her initial goal and obtain her master's degree in journalism. While at the bookstore getting a GRE prep book, she skimmed through an LSAT prep book and decided that law school was more appealing. She took the LSAT and applied to McGeorge and UC Davis law schools. She heard from McGeorge first with an acceptance and partial "life experience grant." She was wait-listed at UC Davis. Thus, she attended McGeorge, where she loved her law school experience.

Hartwell had a very successful first year, finishing in the top five of her class. As a 2L, she tutored real property, contracts and civil procedure. She spent half the summer after her second year clerking for a law firm and the second half

attending McGeorge's "Summer in Austria" session with former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy. During her third year, in addition to clerking at a plaintiff's law firm, she also served as president of the Black Law Students Association.

She had multiple offers after law school, and ultimately chose Lionel Sawyer & Collins. In addition to learning how to practice law, she developed a love for playing bridge while partnering with Dan McGuire and/or Kirby Smith in many tournaments at the firm. Hartwell and McGuire even came in first place in one of the regional tournaments.

In 2008, Hartwell and her current law partner, Laura J. Thalacker, became partners at Lionel Sawyer. In August 2014, they started Hartwell Thalacker, Ltd, a management-side employment law and business litigation law firm. The move seemed fated. They secured office space in Southern Highlands less than a mile from Hartwell's home. Most of their clients made the move with them.

"Owning our own firm has given me the freedom to prioritize serving our clients and the community while spending quality time with my family," Hartwell said.

Hartwell's commitment to the legal community rivals that of anyone in Las Vegas. She's been recognized by the State Bar of Nevada as its Medal of Justice recipient, and she has earned the prestigious "Pro Bono Attorney of the Year" designation from the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada. She has also been named the "Attorney of the Year" by the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association, and has won Bank of America's Local Hero Award. She has also been awarded the Judge Sally Loehrer Pro Bono Service Award and the Myrna Williams Children's Attorney Pro Bono Award. Most recently, she was awarded the Clark County Law Foundation's Liberty Bell Award.

Hartwell finds great fulfillment and purpose in service to Nevada. She is a past president of the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association, is a member of the 2010 Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Las Vegas executive leadership program, and is the

Doreen Spears Hartwell (middle row, right) enjoys Thanksgiving 2019 with her family.



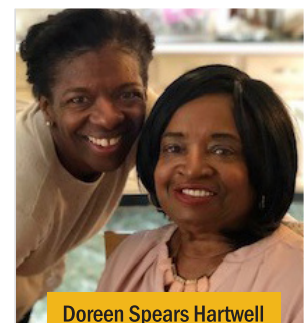
Doreen Spears Hartwell celebrates graduating from McGeorge Law School with her father, grandmother, and grandfather.



Doreen Spears Hartwell enjoys traveling with her daughter, Chloe - a freshman at Princeton University.

chairperson of the Pro Bono Advisory Council for the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada. She is also on the Nevada Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission, she's served as the secretary and director of the Nevada Civic Center Engagement, is a former Lawyer Representative for the Nevada U.S. District Court, and has served as a supervising attorney for the Clark County Law Foundation's Trial by Peers Program, which has recently been revamped to the Restorative Justice Program.

In her spare time, Hartwell loves reading, jogging, and traveling. Six years ago, she obtained her scuba diving certification. Her favorite travel partner is her daughter, Chloe, who is a freshman at Princeton. They have traveled to Mexico, Europe, Australia, South Africa, and Japan. They're planning their next trip to South America.



Doreen Spears Hartwell poses for a photo with her mother.