

NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

Meet Debra Bookout:

Novel Leads Bookout to Fight Injustice

BY MARY BACON, ESQ.

Debra Bookout was born in Houston, the third of five children – four girls and one boy. Her mother, Eva, emigrated from Mexico and attended North Texas State University. While there, she met Bookout’s father, George, a fellow business major, through her suitemate who was dating his brother. They were married in a traditional Catholic ceremony. Her mother went on to become a high school teacher and guidance counselor, and her father became an accountant.

Bookout’s upbringing was fairly traditional. On her mom’s side, she had a large extended family, with 21 cousins, most of whom lived in the Houston area. The family spent many weekends and holidays together. They would sometimes spend the summer soaking up the language and culture of her mom’s hometown in Mexico. Bookout and her family also spent many summers and Christmas holidays in Wichita Falls, Texas, with her dad’s family. Some of her fondest memories there are of playing football in the park with her cousins, shelling peas from her grandmother’s garden and picking blueberries to make cobbles, eating watermelon, and playing games on the front porch.

As a child, Bookout attended parochial school where she played volleyball, softball, basketball, and ran track. She was independent, energetic, and a little fresh. By high

school, it was clear parochial school was not a good fit, and she completed high school at a public school. She was always reading and had an extensive vocabulary, which she used to explore ideas, debate anyone at any time, and (always) have the last word. These traits led to her family insisting she should become a lawyer. And, after reading “To Kill a Mockingbird” as a young girl, her fate was sealed. College and law school were penciled into her life plan.

After graduating high school, Bookout went to college at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, more than 500 miles from home. While she enjoyed it, Lubbock was quite small, and very conservative. She transferred to the University of Houston her sophomore year for a more traditional big-city college experience. She spent a semester abroad in Salamanca, Spain, where she honed her Spanish skills. She joined Alpha Chi Omega and was very active in the sorority where she made life-long friends. She worked throughout her college years, from sweeping hair at Supercuts to keeping the books at a printing company.

While law school was definitely on the agenda, Bookout needed to earn some money first. She worked for a Mexico tour operator and as a scheduling assistant for a cardiovascular surgery office. Three years after graduating college, she applied for law school, and the University of Texas at Austin School of Law accepted her with a full tuition scholarship. While adjusting to the rigor of law school took some getting used to, she hit her stride and in her third year became a teaching assistant in the writing program.

Upon graduation, Bookout packed up her bags and moved to Florida. She secured a job in the Broward County Public Defender’s Office in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, where she worked for almost 12 years. She had always hated injustice of any kind, and this work clarified her commitment to fighting it. She first worked in the trial unit and later in the post-conviction and appeals unit. Florida’s constant sunshine



and her passion for scuba diving made working in Florida feel like a constant vacation.

In 2004, when the Federal Public Defender's Office in Las Vegas responded to her resume, Bookout knew Nevada would be her next home. She interviewed for and accepted a position in the Non-Capital Habeas Unit. This work was very rewarding, but it was also complex and mentally difficult, given the subject matter. After almost a decade in the unit, she knew she needed a change.

In 2013, Bookout joined the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, where she started as a staff attorney in the Consumer Rights Project, handling foreclosure and other consumer cases. She began transitioning to guardianship work in 2014. In June 2015, she became a member of the Nevada Supreme Court's Commission to Study the Creation and Administration of Guardianships in Nevada's Courts.

With Jim Berchtold at the helm, Bookout worked to develop Legal Aid Center's Guardianship Advocacy Program (GAP). Advocating for the rights of vulnerable adults and seniors with disabilities proved to be a very good fit for her.

"When I think of Debra, the word 'feisty' immediately pops into my head – in the very best possible sense," Berchtold said. "She's just incredibly dedicated and basically fearless. She has this innate abhorrence for injustice and will do whatever she can to fix the wrong, whether that's fighting for a vulnerable client or advocating for big policy change. Her work has really helped remake guardianship in Nevada. And for me, getting to work side by side with her in that work has been a tremendous experience.

Her passion is energizing and contagious. She's a terrific person and a great friend."

Bookout worked her way up from lead attorney to deputy directing attorney, and finally to directing attorney of GAP. She supervises 19 attorneys, five legal assistants, four advocates, and two case managers.

"My favorite part of the job is working with this group of amazing, talented and compassionate people," Bookout said. "Rarely do they receive thanks or recognition for their hard work, but they do it anyway, every single day."

One of Bookout's favorite guardianship stories is that of a client who had been in guardianship for many years, yet had only mild intellectual disabilities and was quite capable of living on her own. After the guardianship court finally appointed an attorney to advocate for her, this client's guardianship was terminated. Free from the guardianship, this client blossomed. Her confidence grew, and she found her voice as an advocate. Her client is currently an ambassador for the independent living community where she lives with other folks with disabilities.

For fun, Bookout volunteers as a steward with the Clark County Wetlands Park and previously served as a board member of the Nevada Wilderness Project. She enjoys traveling, staying active, gardening, cooking, weaving, and working with clay.

Debra Bookout is sworn in as an attorney in December 1992.



Debra Bookout (left) takes a photo with her siblings, Diana, Brent, Brenda, and Laurie.



Debra Bookout signs "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair" with her Alpha Chi Omega sorority sisters in 1984.

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