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O'Donnell summons experiences for new role

BY TARA E. BUCK
Daily Record Reporter
tara.buck@nydailyrecord.com

Through the course of her professional career, Denise O'Donnell has been a social worker, a judicial law clerk, a U.S. attorney, a politician and policy advisor and more.

Late last month, she was confirmed as the new commissioner of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

Her latest appointment follows more recent work as a litigator and partner at Hodgson Russ LLP, and a failed 2006 candidacy for the office of New York State Attorney General.

O'Donnell, 59, said she left her post as U.S. Attorney for the Western District of New York in 2001 "because of a change in administration."

"I ran for attorney general because I really wanted to get back in public service," she said. "That's the way I want to spend my career."

O'Donnell admitted she sometimes misses her courtroom role; however, she said she believes that "to make change, you need to make it at the policy level. Having the experiences that I've had as a prosecutor and a social worker, I can always go back to concrete examples."

A native of Buffalo, O'Donnell had five brothers and sisters and was the first person in her family to go to college.

Shortly thereafter, she moved to New York City with her husband — State Supreme Court Judge John O'Donnell — while he attended law school. In Brooklyn, before attending school for social work, she became a case worker in child protection, making home visits and supervising families.

The couple later returned Upstate, where she earned a masters in social work from SUNY at Buffalo. After spending 10 years focusing on child abuse and neglect, substance abuse and community mental health issues, O'Donnell entered SUNY at Buffalo School of Law, and received her JD in 1982.

"My parents really valued education, maybe because they didn't have one. In some ways, they saw it as a way to get ahead," O'Donnell said. "They were very driven to see that their kids all went to college, even though it was a real financial struggle for them."

As a clerk for the late Appellate Division, Fourth Department, Presiding Justice Dolores Denman, O'Donnell learned to appreciate the human element of law.

"I would be struck at times that the cases she would have the most difficulty with would be family court cases, or family-oriented cases, even though she was also deciding these huge business and corporate disputes," O'Donnell said.

"She also was just such a professional role model ... for me, to see that early on in my career, a woman who had children balancing career and family and achieving a relatively high level in the judiciary," O'Donnell said.

She credits Justice Denman with helping her get a job in the U.S. Attorney's office.

"She kind of encouraged the U.S. attorney at the time to hire me," O'Donnell said. "She was a big supporter of women going into prosecution, so I think she had a big impact on my life in that way. She loved criminal law, too, and I think that was a bit infectious. She really had an impact on me in terms of becoming a prosecutor."

As the Western New York district's U.S. Attorney, O'Donnell later found a mentor in U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, with whom she worked a great deal. O'Donnell served as vice-chairwoman of the Attorney General's Advisory Committee in Washington, D.C., a group whose members were hand-picked by Reno to work on policy issues for the Justice Department.

"[Reno] had been a district attorney for a long time. She understood law enforcement but she never lost sight of the human side of things as well," O'Donnell said.

The group discussed ways for U.S. attorneys to become more involved in their communities, worked on juvenile justice programs, methods to reduce violent crime and more.

Focusing on youth-centered initiatives to prevent crime continues to be a priority for O'Donnell as she takes on her latest role. In addition to the more than $200 million in state funding and fee revenues the division oversees, an additional $45.3 million (fiscal 2006-2007) in federal funding covers oversight of federal juvenile justice programs, "which have been pretty dramatically cut in the past eight years,

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unfortunately. But we really are looking to develop that focus in the Project Impact sites."

"Rochester has really been focused in that direction," she noted. "It's just that there's so much to do."

"You can do it kid by kid. You have to get started without thinking you're going to be able to meet all of the needs out there and support the programs that seem to be effective. A really important part of fighting crime is keeping kids from getting involved in the very beginning."

While rates of crime have declined in New York City and statewide through the past 10 years, rates of violent crime Upstate have increased dramatically, O'Donnell said.

New York City has found success in data-driven law enforcement that utilizes the latest technologies in crime mapping, for instance.

"They've done things that can be replicated Upstate and can help," she said. "We did get some additional funding for fighting crime Upstate in this budget, and I do think the fact that the governor has a strong law enforcement background makes him understand the issue and value of some of the things we're trying to do."

State funds are available for for new crime fighting technology in economically challenged regions, and ensuring that technology is put to use is another priority for O'Donnell.

Culling data from other law enforcement agencies and conducting further research and data analysis will help police to find new solutions in tackling crime, she said.

"There's a lot of room for creativity," O'Donnell said. "We have a research component and we can decide what we think are the most important issues. ... The technology component will make sure we are both keeping ahead and find new technologies that help the criminal justice system function better."

"I worked in many of the areas that are so closely related to crime — poverty, education or lack of education, our high school drop out rate, the number of people we have in poverty in Buffalo and Rochester, the narcotics addiction problem. All of those problems certainly are related to crime, but that doesn't mean we can't do more to address it and come to terms with it."

A new emphasis on effective re-entry programs could also decrease rates of recidivism, she said.

"The single most important thing that can be done is to really ensure people, as they're released, become eligible for Medicaid and can continue to receive medication if they have a mental illness. It's equally important for treatment if they have some kind of addiction."

She said the re-entry program in Monroe County "needs a lot more support," financially and otherwise.

"Re-entry is really everybody's issue. It's not one re-entry coordinator's, not just parole, it really is a community response. So you need social services, you need mental health, you need the providers for addiction services, housing programs, religious groups. ... So many times people see the issue of returning inmates as something that needs a law enforcement focus and that you shouldn't coddle criminals, but it's really a community philosophy that needs to be changed. ... You can cut down on recidivism pretty dramatically if you have the services."

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