

Sensitive 'Outsider' Believes in Rehabilitation and Hope

By Susan McRae
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Cynthia L. Loo's life these days is a contrast in emotional extremes from presiding over heart-wrenching cases of youthful offenders to attending the Academy Awards ceremonies.

Loo's boyfriend, Hughes Winborne, won an Oscar in March for his film editing of "Crash," which also won best picture.

As Winborne accepted his award, the cameras panned to Loo. She said her makeup had run from crying and her coiffure was disheveled. Her hairstylist, watching the nationally televised show, told her later, "'What happened? Your part moved.'"

Loo cherishes those lighter moments, particularly because her job as a juvenile delinquency court referee often exacts an emotional toll of another sort.

A former dependency court lawyer, who represented abused and neglected children, Loo, 43, was appointed a referee in 2000 by the Los Angeles County Superior Court judges. She spent her first year presiding over family law matters, before being assigned to delinquency court, first in Compton and now at Eastlake.

Her tiny courtroom inside the aging 22-acre juvenile detention complex, just north of downtown Los Angeles, is bare of decoration except for two black-and-white posters of a father and child. It is not uncommon to hear a mother sobbing as her child is sent to juvenile hall or camp for breaking the law.

"That love between parent and child is so strong," she said, "and, for that reason, they can't believe their child can be guilty."

On a recent morning, a mother entered the courtroom with her 6-year-old son in tow. The child exclaimed excitedly as the bailiff brought in his older brother from lockup, and the entire family broke into smiles. But the reunion was brief.

Loo determined the teen would do well to spend time in a structured program at juvenile camp and ordered him detained at the hall in the meantime. As the mother led her younger son from the courtroom, he kept looking over his shoulder at his big brother being led off by the bailiff in the opposite direction.

That, Loo said later, was one of the easier cases.

The cases Loo dreads most, she said, are those that require fitness hearings to determine whether a youth should be tried in adult court.

"One of the things about juvenile court is it's about rehabilitation and hope," she said. "With fitness hearings, you have less discretion.

"But sometimes the facts are such that you have to send a kid to adult court, and that is very painful ... when you know the consequences."

In Compton, she said, it was especially difficult to keep youths in juvenile court because so many of them were accused of serious crimes involving guns and gangs.

Compton was harder in other ways, too.

Both public defenders and prosecutors have a reputation of filing affidavits against judicial officers who don't rule to their liking, lawyers who appear in that court say.

Michael H. Salmaggi, who was Loo's calendar deputy public defender in Compton, admits he didn't start off on a good relationship with Loo.

He disagreed with her rulings on motions to suppress evidence and on reasonable doubt, he said. As a result, he filed 126 affidavits within the first two weeks to have his cases heard before another judicial officer.

Eventually, he said, they had a talk. And while Loo didn't completely agree with his way of thinking, he said he noticed a "slight turnaround." After that, things went more smoothly, and over time, he said, he came to admire her dedication and insight.

Compton also posed other problems.

Loo, who is Chinese-American, had trouble gaining the acceptance of the predominately African-American population. But her sensitivity to the community's needs slowly won people over, lawyers said.

"They embraced her for her compassion and judicial nature," Salmaggi said. "She wasn't just

a person who comes out of the back room and disappears and is not responsive to the community."

Salmaggi recalled being particularly touched watching Loo console a grandmother in the courthouse hallway. The woman's 15-year-old grandson had been killed in a drive-by shooting.

The youth had been in Loo's courtroom only days earlier.

He had been on probation, and the police stopped him as he was walking down the street, Loo said. The youth mouthed off. The police made him empty his pockets and drove him to his grandmother's house. By that time, Loo said, the boy was all roiled up, yelling for his grandmother to call his probation officer.

In court, the prosecutor wanted to send the teen to camp. Loo put him on house arrest instead.

The following Sunday, while the boy's grandmother was preparing breakfast, drive-by shooters sprayed the house with gunfire. When it was over, Loo said, the teen was slumped beside the front door, dead.

"I thought, if only I had sent him to camp like they wanted me to," Loo said, recalling the incident.

On the back of the program for the boy's funeral, the grandmother had printed a special thanks to Loo for her kindness and help.

One of the things Loo said she tries to impress on the youths she sees in her court and in the community outreach work she does is to be respectful to police officers who stop them. They will have a much better chance of being released to their parents and not end up in court, she tells them.

"So many kids, especially in Compton, are picked up because of a bad attitude," she said.

Salmaggi said he appreciated Loo's background in dependency law because it made her particularly sensitive to the needs of foster children. Whenever possible, he said, she would try to find a way to keep youths from being sent to juvenile hall or camp so they wouldn't lose their foster services.

"When appropriate, she would go out on a limb to help a foster kid," Salmaggi said, "and never once was burned by one of those kids. She knew when to gamble."

"She genuinely cares for minors and is very open-minded," said Deputy District Attorney Terrence S. Terauchi, who also appeared before Loo in Compton.

Lawyers at Eastlake have been similarly impressed by Loo's caring and sensitivity.

Alternate Deputy Public Defender Sherry Gold said Loo recently came to court on what was supposed to be her day off because the previous day she had made a decision involving a teen offender that troubled her. So she called the lawyers in for a hearing and changed her decision.

"She is always fair to me and my clients," Gold said. "She listens to all my presentations, lets me call witnesses and doesn't cut me off. And [she] is interested in the mental health of my clients."

Loo also is considerate, lawyers aid, an important factor in delinquency court, where the crowded calendar can keep parents waiting in the hallway for hours for their child's case to be called.

"Parents are there because their kids screw up," panel attorney Antonio Govea said. "So the last thing they want is a tongue lashing. She apologizes because they have to wait."

Lawyers say Loo always tries to find the best situation for the youths. She will give them a chance to pull up their grades and stay out of trouble. But if they don't, she isn't afraid to send them to camp or, in rare cases, to the state's youth prison.

At Eastlake, Loo said, she still gets the grim cases, but not as many.

"Emotionally, it's easier," Loo said. "It gives me more opportunity to be involved in bar activities, which I like.

"But I'm glad I sat in Compton. It's a tough place."

The youngest of three sisters, Loo, 43, was born in Los Angeles. Her father, Thomas S. Loo, is a corporate securities attorney at Santa Monica's Greenberg Traurig. Her sister Wendy A. Loo is a Los Angeles deputy city attorney and sister Lori A. Loo is a family law attorney at Brot & Gross in Sherman Oaks.

Loo laughingly calls her mother, Mona Loo, the only normal one. She works with a day-labor exchange, helping people to get work.

"I hope I've inherited my mother's compassion and my father's work ethic and love of the law," she said.

Loo didn't start off wanting to be a lawyer. Her father wanted her to be an accountant. She tried, she said, but she wasn't good with numbers, so she switched to business and marketing. After earning a bachelor's degree at USC, she worked at a recording company, where, she said, no women or minorities had jobs in upper management.

She thought if she got a law degree it might help.

Loo spent her first year at American University Washington College of Law in Washington, D.C., then switched to USC Gould School of law, graduating in 1990.

While waiting for the State Bar Exam results, Loo took a job as a law clerk at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The work and a chance meeting with a lawyer there, who shared with her his experience of joining the freedom rides in Alabama at the beginning of the 1960s' civil rights movement, kindled a passion for public interest work.

Loo already knew how it felt to be an outsider. She grew up in Malibu, where everyone was blond, and she was only one of three Asians at her school. Later, at USC, a friend invited her to join her sorority and then had to renege because the sorority wouldn't accept Asians.

So, after passing the Bar Exam, she looked for work that would make a difference. That led to a job as staff attorney at the Children's Law Center in Monterey Park, helping abused and neglected children reunite with their families or, when not possible, finding them a permanent loving foster home.

Loo also became involved in various public interest organizations and bar groups and has taught criminal procedure and juvenile law at the People's College of Law.

She has volunteered with the Unlawful Detainer Equal Access Project of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and the Domestic Violence Project of the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Barristers, to name two. She has spoken to community groups on gang violence,

the three-strikes law, domestic violence, diversity and juvenile justice.

The Los Angeles County Juvenile Court Bar Association named her Juvenile Court Judge of the Year in 2004.

A copy of a Daily Journal profile of U.S. District Judge Robert M. Takasugi sits under glass on top of her desk in her chambers. Loo, who has applied to be a commissioner, said she hopes to emulate Takasugi's courage and low-key style.

"I realized you don't have to be gruff and aggressive, like I thought judges had to be," she said.

Because of the confidentiality of juvenile proceedings, instead of case names, here is a list of attorneys who appear before Referee Loo:

From the juvenile court panel: Antonio Govea, Pasadena; Manuel J. Martinez, Maywood; John R. Fischer, Pasadena; Randy G. Sortino, Verdugo City; John R. Borges, Los Angeles

From district attorney's office: Stephanie L. Nally, Terrence S. Terauchi, Christopher J. Frisco

From the public defender's office: Michael H. Salmaggi, Arturo Castro

From the alternate public defender's office: Sherry Gold

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