

Jan Tansil — “A Drop of Golden Sun”

The law office of Spaulding, McCullough & Tansil, at South E Street and Sonoma Avenue, is imposing. The partners’ names on the building are visible for several blocks. I was prepared to be very impressed by Jan Tansil, not only because she’s a named partner in a well-known law firm, but also because she’s married to Judge Mark Tansil.

Ushered into a pleasant conference room on the second floor, a ray of sunshine entered the room. It was Jan. By the end of our time together, I was impressed, but for entirely different reasons than my preconceived notions.

Jan grew up in Austin, Minnesota, home to Hormel’s (think Spam) manufacturing plant and corporate headquarters. Thanks to Hormel, the town of approximately 20,000 residents had an excellent orchestra, support for the arts, and kids’ YMCA memberships of one dollar.

Jan saw how management, workers and the entire community prospered with Hormel, which influenced her decision to become a labor and employment lawyer to create a working environment that benefits everyone. (Spaulding McCullough & Tansil was formed with that same goal.) That Hormel’s symbiotic labor relationship later crashed and burned mirrors Jan’s current concerns about income inequality and the path capitalism and our current version of democracy seems to be on.

Jan decided to be a lawyer when she was in the fifth grade, as the first step to becoming President. This was a serious goal. Being involved in politics, after all, was the way to change things. Add to this her fifth grade teacher’s “No goal is unachievable,” and you might be surprised that it’s Hilary Clinton, not Jan, who’s likely to run in 2016.

At 18, Jan bumped into politics by becoming the precinct chair of the Republican Party. Between college and law school, she interned in the U.S. Senate, as an aide to Senator David Durenberger. She wrote position papers, attended committee hearings and realized she disagreed with nearly every position taken by the Republican Party. However, using her Senate Staff pass for unlimited access to US Supreme Court oral arguments was absolutely inspiring for this future lawyer. The end result was that she still wanted to be a lawyer but not a politician (and she switched parties).

Jan tempers her passion for politics with a passion for travel. After law school in Boulder, Colorado, where she balanced

the rigors of law school with hiking and skiing in the Rockies, she backpacked in Europe for four months, including exploring her family’s roots in Norway.

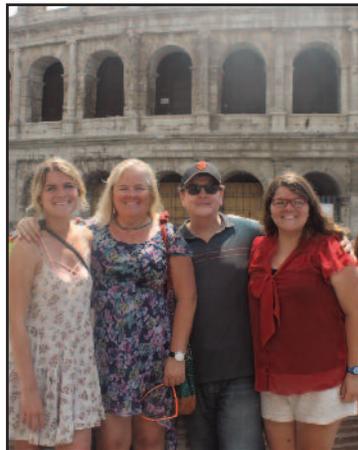
In the early 1990s, Jan and Mark visited Tioman, an island off the coast of Malaysia. This was during Ramadan, the month of fasting during daylight hours by the Muslim inhabitants. Residents served food on their front porches to the few tourists. They told the Tansils that the money they would normally spend for food during Ramadan would be shared with others who were not as wealthy. The fact that these lovely islanders who had no indoor plumbing or electricity considered themselves wealthy enough to share with others had a great impact on Jan.

Maybe because their families were thousands of miles away, the Tansils became inseparable friends with another family, the Nelsons. They traveled Europe together, including hiking in the Swiss Alps. Christine Nelson told me, “I will never forget scaling a glacier in Switzerland. We were traversing the glacier on what some may have called a trail with a severe drop off of 500 feet to our right side. True to Janny’s character, she practically ran along the 12” path with no concern in the world.”

On a trip to Spain with the Nelsons, Jan took the five kids (two Tansils and three Nelsons, aged 7-13) from their rented farmhouse to Barcelona, in part to show

them how to use public transportation and that not everyone travels by car. Although she lost the kids in the Picasso museum for an hour, everyone learned from the experience and great memories were made.

Both Jan’s daughters absorbed their parents’ enthusiasm for travel. Carly, 22, spent ten weeks in Nicaragua and later helped lead a student group to Ecuador. She recently climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro to celebrate graduation from UCSB. When Carly was studying in Thailand, Jan and daughter Shelby, 20, traveled with Carly in Thailand. On the way home, they had a 17 hour layover in Beijing and spent most of their time at the Great Wall. Shelby, 20, a junior at the University of Tennessee is active in environmental issues, did an educational exchange in Japan and will be studying creative writing in Ireland starting in January. Both girls backpacked in Europe with friends between high school and college.



The Tansil family (Carly, Jan, Mark & Shelby) on a recent trip to Italy

Despite extensive traveling and a demanding law practice, Jan has always contributed to her community. She was on the United Way board of directors for nine years, and saw close up how great the needs are. She represents dozens of non-profit organizations at a discounted rate, and wishes she could do it all pro bono.

While her daughters went to Analy High School, she was president of the AHS Education Foundation. Working with Principal Chris Heller, AHSEF helped facilitate and fund experiential learning programs, such as Eco-Action and Maker classes. Chris said Jan is “incredibly caring about our entire community and always focusing on what she could do to help more....always reliable and generous in supporting our school.”

Cheryl Costantini, a Sebastopol potter and friend of Jan’s, worked with Jan starting the REACH Creative Arts Magnet, a new charter school in Sebastopol. Cheryl described Jan as a “power house.” She added, “Jan thinks big. She thinks broad.”

Jan has three brothers and two sisters, but none of them live in California. She describes her whole family as really close, loud and fun. For the past fifteen years, she and her sisters have gathered annually on Sanibel Island in the Florida Gulf. “The brothers hold their breath when the sisters get together, and with good reason.”

I asked Jan how she met Mark, our well-known and respected Superior Court judge.

She was a brand-new lawyer sitting on a jury in his courtroom. The first question Judge Tansil asked her in voir dire was “Are you married?” The bailiff then shot a rubber band at Judge Tansil, who laughed. This seemed like an interesting guy to Jan. She noticed they worked out at the same gym, and then their respective secretaries invited them to the former (notorious) Bosses Night dinner dance. Mark then asked her out for three dates in one phone call: lunch, a steel drum concert, and hiking. On the hike at Point Reyes, he proposed.

During the interval between interviewing Jan and writing this profile, the “Do Re Mi” song kept running through my head as I thought about what to write. With her beautiful blond hair, her self-described fast pace, and her incandescent energy, she reminded me of a ray of sunshine. Despite being a partner in prominent Sonoma County law firm and married to a judge, I came away more impressed by how lovable, fun, and warm Jan is. She’s a great lawyer, too! ☺

By Gail Jonas

Gail Jonas is a mediator and estate planner in Healdsburg and has written attorney profiles for the bar quarterly since 1997. Her website is www.GailJonas.com

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Firm...**Gabriel Quinnan** opened his own firm, Quinnan Law...**Sandra McMullan** is now with Littler Mendelson P.C. ...**John Loveman** is now with Carle, Mackie, Power and Ross LLP... The Superior Court of California, County of Sonoma, has announced that **Hon. Nancy Case Shaffer** is the new Supervising Judge for the Civil Law Division, **Hon. Jamie Thistlethwaite** is the new Supervising Judge for the Criminal Law Division, **Hon. Bradford DeMeo** is the new Supervising Judge for the Family Law Division, and **Hon. Jennifer Dollard** has been appointed Commissioner...**Heather-Ann Young** has joined Perry, Johnson, Anderson, Miller and Moskowitz.