

# A DEVOTION TO THE LAW

David Carrera



*William Louis Hennessy is quite a guy. Last year he and his wife*

*took 17-year-old Kenny McFarland into their home. A high school basketball superstar at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, Kenny was on the verge of flunking out. He lived with the Hennessy family for seven months in Charles County, learning good study habits, discipline and responsibility. Kenny did finish high school and will start college this fall under a full basketball scholarship at a division one school.*

*This fall Hennessy too will start at a new school. At 39, he'll begin as a part-time, first-year evening student in the law school class of 1998. And, he'll continue as Commander Hennessy (of the Homicide Division, District of Columbia Police Department), as a caring husband and proud father of three.*

*Hennessy's story is one of motivation, dedication and determination. He spoke with me this summer shortly before classes began.*

**What inspired you to attend law school?**

It's something I wanted to do all my life, but I never had the chance. I had a daughter when I was 17 and was lucky to get through high school. In 1988, I was promoted to captain, which is the last rank in the promotional hierarchy. I had done well on the promotional exams, which put me in the study mode. I'm only going to be here a few more years and I wanted to prepare myself to do something when I leave. I decided to pursue the dream of going to law school.

I started going to college and have been plugging away at it ever since. Finally I received enough credits, took the LSAT, applied and was accepted. I've always been fascinated by the law, particularly law enforcement. I've been involved in it for over 21 years and there comes a time when you can't continue to be a physical force. Ten years from now I won't be able to do the type of work I'm doing. I want a mental challenge instead of a physical challenge in order to continue to do what I've been doing for so long.

**As commander of the Homicide Division in one of the country's more challenging environments, your schedule must be grueling. Would you walk me through a typical day of Lou Hennessy, if there is such a thing as a typical day?**

Normally I get up at 4 a.m. and I'm in the office by 6 a.m. On a normal day I get home about 9 or 10 at night and I'm subject to recall at any time. In an average week I work 60 to 80 hours and some weeks it's days before I get home. It has been demanding, particularly with school, having to carve out blocks of time for reading, studying and research. It's a matter of priorities and you have to set those priorities. But this is a very demanding job.

**How will your law degree help you better serve the community as commander of the Homicide Division?**

We have a very close working relationship with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia. D.C. is unique in that it's a federal city. The U.S. attorneys, as opposed to the state's attorney or local prosecutors, prosecute the majority of cases and all felony and, of course, murder cases. So, if I have a better understanding of what they need and what they're doing, that helps us both. So I think it will have a dual advantage. But chances are I won't be here four years from now. My plans are to stay another two years and then probably retire.

**Up to now, you've dedicated your life to enforcing the law. You are now taking a new route by studying the law and all of its intricacies. Once you have completed law school, you will be armed with the knowledge not only to investigate crime but also potentially to prosecute it. What are your plans for the future?**

I'd like very much to become a federal prosecutor. That's my goal. My immediate goal after law school and passing the bar is to apply to the U.S. Attorney's Office and, maybe some day, be appointed to the bench. That's something I've set as a long-term goal.

**You have a lot of compassion for kids growing up in crime-infested areas of the district. That is evident in the Kenny McFarland story in which you provided the structure, discipline and stability of a loving family environment. What insight can you offer to practicing lawyers about the sometimes forgotten victims of crime in the inner city. Can you tell us how Kenny is today, and do you still keep in touch with him?**

I definitely keep in touch with him and he's doing great. He received a basketball scholarship to St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York and he leaves next month. Academically, he's doing pretty well. He graduated from Gonzaga, which is a very demanding high school, and I

think he will do fine academically at St. Bonaventure. They have the right program for him. They have a very strong support system.

Kenny is typical of a lot of kids who grow up in this city. He is not a very strong person once you get him out of the athletic arena. He is a follower who grew up in a tough neighborhood and, like so many of the inner city kids, grew up without a father. His father died when he was a small child. His mother worked nights, so Kenny didn't have a lot of structure in his life. He was allowed to flounder at home.

The support system at school tried to take care of him, but it wasn't enough. He needed somebody to make him do his homework and make him study. We worked with him on study habits. He has above-average intelligence, so he just needed some redirection, some organization and he could pick up and take off.

In fact, during his senior year he lived with his mother, did well and graduated on time. We took him in his junior year when he was in danger of flunking out of school. He had, for all practical purposes, walked out of school. Had he not come to stay with us, he would have failed. But they gave him another opportunity and he proved himself. I've been given a lot of recognition for what he did, but basically he did it. We gave him the

opportunity to do it, and he's done very well for himself. I'm very proud of him.

As to advice for practicing lawyers, there's not a lot of difference between a kid like Kenny and the kids we bring into this office to question about their involvement in murder cases. There's a fine line there. If we can get to these kids early enough and really

play a role in their lives, have an impact, it's possible to keep them from going too far and ending up in handcuffs and leg shackles. The biggest problem they should have at that age is a flat tire on their bicycle, but instead these kids are out shooting and killing people every day.

And, there's not much difference between those kids and the good kids. Somebody has to be there for them at the right time to provide a little structure. That plays a big role in determining their outcome. I try to take it one day at a time, one person at a time and one case at a time. That's my advice. Trying to make sweeping, drastic programmatic

changes probably is not as effective as being able to just do it a little at a time.

**As a future student, what's the one thing that excites you the most about attending law school?**

Up to this point I was so worried about getting good grades in order to get into law school, that sometimes I forgot

to learn. Now I will be able to focus on learning as opposed to trying for a grade. What I learned on the job wasn't graded. As you learn, you become more effective, better at your work, more respected and you develop self-confidence.

As a kid I was never a good student. I felt fortunate to be hired by the Police Department. They gave me an opportunity and I haven't let them down. I've worked hard and it's made me appreciate things. That's what I'm looking forward to while studying the law. I know what I take out of it is what I put into it.

**What's most intimidating?**

The time. When I first took this job, one thing that really concerned me was my health. I've always worried about my health giving way. In fact, when I increased my school load last year, as a precautionary measure I took out a \$500,000 life insurance policy. I recently increased it because I realize I'm pushing myself just about as hard as I can, and that intimidates me. I have a baby at home, another that's due any time and I'm almost 40 years old. I'd like to be around when they are ready for college and perhaps marriage. Whatever they decide to do, I want to be part of it, to see it.

It's intimidating to think that this job could kill me. Most people would consider what I do stressful, being out on the streets and exposed to the violence. I've always had street smarts. That's an area with which I'm very comfortable. There was very little stress in that for me. I have always wanted to get to this point, to go to law school and learn something that I will be able to use for the rest of my life.

*We plan to bring you stories of entering law students in the future and would like your comments and/or suggestions about future articles or interviews.*

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