

CONTRIBUTOR BIO

MELISSA PRATT PEDROZA is the Deputy District Attorney for San Bernardino County and graduated with a degree in Political Science in 2002 from Cal Poly

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Melissa (Pratt) Pedroza

Melissa was a driven and ambitious undergraduate student, a “Type-A” personality, as she would refer to herself. When she graduated from Cal Poly, Melissa commissioned from the ROTC program into the U.S. Army. After about four years of active duty service, including two tours in Iraq, Melissa attended law school and then promptly began working for the District Attorney’s office in San Bernardino.

While at Cal Poly, Melissa became involved in Model United Nations and the ROTC program. The combination of Model UN and ROTC gave her valuable skills. Model UN helped her hone her public speaking and writing skills and the military encouraged her self-discipline, time management, and gave her a path after graduation. Melissa signed a contract with the Army after her first year at Cal Poly; the Army would pay for the rest of her education and she would owe time after school.

After graduating, she was active duty in the Army for four years. Following training in Virginia, Melissa was stationed in Fort Drum as the Platoon Leader of a Supply Platoon. Within two months of being at Fort Drum, her platoon was deployed to Tikrit, Iraq where she spent her time doing convoys and humanitarian missions. Melissa was back in the states for six months after her

first tour, and then her unit was sent back to Iraq again for another year. She was promoted to Captain and pulled up to battalion staff, which changed her responsibilities. They were stationed outside of Abu Ghraib so they took mortar fire often. Things calmed down when they moved camps halfway through the second tour.

It was at this point in time that Melissa began applying for law school; she took the LSAT her junior/senior year at Cal Poly and her scores were about to expire. To decide which law schools to apply to, she looked at the areas she wanted to live in, cost of living, housing, tuition, scholarship availability, and if the school had the areas she wanted to study. Based upon all of these factors, Melissa chose the University of La Verne. There were approximately thirty people in her classes, so there was a lot of individual attention, which she said kept her on track. The national law school rankings were something Melissa did not take into account. She said, "Unless you are going to work for a big name law firm, it doesn't matter where you get your degree."

She enjoyed law school more than her undergraduate career; she liked all of her classes, thrived in the smaller environment, and became very involved thanks to the guidance of some of her professors. Melissa was involved in Moot Court, which is similar to mock trial; she would present case law to argue her point in front of judges as if it was an appellate court. Melissa felt as though she finally had found what she was meant to do, and was offered the job she wanted upon graduation from law school. During law school, Melissa had done an externship with the U.S. Attorney's office and the District Attorney's office. The DA's office was faster paced, so she set her sights on working there after graduation.

Melissa's hard work paid off and she began work at the San Bernardino DA's office after graduating from law school. When she started at the DA's office, she handled misdemeanor cases for a few years, such as DUIs, child abuse, domestic violence, and petty thefts, for which she appeared at pre-trials, and handled the cases that went to trial. During her first two years, Melissa did twenty misdemeanor trials.

Now, Melissa is handling felony cases. A typical weekday for Melissa involves responding to motions, appearing in court to argue a motion, taking part in preliminary hearings, or preparing for cases to go to trial. For Melissa, trials are the most difficult and the most enjoyable. Her least favorite aspect of her job is jury selection, because she is required to ask twelve strangers personal questions

and delve into their issues. Questioning witnesses and cross-examination is Melissa's favorite part of her job; she says it is a game of trying to get all of the evidence out while making out the defendant to be untrustworthy.

Melissa encourages seniors and recent graduates to take a year off, travel, intern, and figure out what you want to do. She stated that it helps to have life experience after college before committing to do postgraduate work, whatever it may be. Gaining experience puts many things into perspective. Once you start your career, you will not have the time to have these experiences again. Melissa would not have changed her path at all. The horror stories that students and young professionals hear about lawyers who are miserable and unhappy are not all true. Melissa is in the business of seeking justice, and loves it.