

# One Case at a Time

How a kid from LA and a prodigy from the USSR met, fell in love, and started a practice BY ANDREW ENGELSON

At first, she turned him down.

Randy McMurray and Yana Henriks met at a cocktail mixer for consumer attorneys in Beverly Hills in 2008, and, over drinks, they chatted and exchanged business cards. A few days later, he called to tell her there was an opening at the Cochran firm where he worked. "I laughed and said: 'I don't want to work for anyone,'" says Henriks, who had her own business litigation firm at the time.

They crossed paths again several months later at an annual law convention in Las Vegas; this time the connection went beyond the professional.

"I had an eye for her," says McMurray, "and I made that known."

"That's when it was for real," Henriks says. "That's how everything started."

They married in 2009 at a small ceremony in Beverly Hills, with family and friends from California and Armenia attending. Four years later, they started McMurray Henriks, a firm focusing on civil rights, medical malpractice, plaintiff litigation and personal injury.



Growing up 7,000 miles away from each other, Henriks was always interested in the law, while McMurray got interested after an encounter with a bad cop.



It was an unlikely journey that brought them together.

**HENRIKS WAS BORN AND RAISED** in Armenia when it was still part of the Soviet Union. Both parents were law professors. Her father, who also practiced, helped write Armenia's first constitution after it gained independence, and later served as its attorney general. All of this rubbed off on Henriks, who, as a young girl, participated in legal discussions at the dinner table. At age 12, she would join her father at work, ostensibly to play pingpong, but instead she would sneak off to the file room to read through cases. "I would bring up the inconsistencies," Henriks says. "And that's when my dad became serious and said, 'She's got to go to law school.'"

That's how she wound up at Yerevan State University's law school at age 16. "I was made fun of," she

remembers. "The students felt I was this immature kid who somehow hopped into their class." Indoctrination into Soviet-era Marxist concepts such as dialectical materialism wasn't exactly fun, either. But she worked twice as hard to prove she could hold her own, and after the requisite six years she got her degree, then started a firm with fellow graduates.

By this time the Soviet Union had collapsed, and in 1992 Henriks won a scholarship to study international humanitarian law in Geneva. Two years later, she traveled to New York City to meet one of her law professors. "I realized this is where I belong," Henriks says. "That was it. I'm still Armenian, I still love my country, but this is my country now."

**GROWING UP IN LA**, McMurray wanted to be a football player. "Wide receiver," he adds. But a hard tackle that knocked him unconscious changed his mind. As an undergraduate at Cal Poly Pomona, he had plans to become an architect. Then came another hard tackle.

One night he was out on a drive with friends when a police officer pulled them over for a traffic violation; McMurray was thrown to the ground and punched in the back. At trial, he was assigned an inexperienced alternate public defender, who seemed afraid of going before a judge and jury, and who urged him to plead guilty. "They had me resisting arrest and fighting with the police," McMurray says. "I didn't do any of it. It was completely fabricated."





**Randy H. McMurray**

McMurray Henriks;  
Civil Rights; Los Angeles

**Yana Henriks**

McMurray Henriks;  
Civil Rights; Los Angeles

That's when McMurray vowed to become a lawyer. "I decided I would never put myself in that position again—where I had to depend on somebody else to defend me or protect others."

While getting his J.D. at Southwestern Law School, McMurray worked as a civilian bailiff and learned by observing. "I moved from courtroom to courtroom wherever there was a jury trial," he says. "I got to watch the best and the worst trial lawyers on the planet." In this pilot program, McMurray was assigned to take care of jurors' needs, and this early experience helped him in the art of jury selection. He graduated from law school in 1986 and went on to be hired at Browne Green for personal injury work. "I did products, airplanes, helicopter crashes, you name it. If it had a catastrophic injury, we did them."

Gradually, McMurray began to take on civil rights work, including the case of a bystander who became a paraplegic after she was struck by a police car involved in a high-speed pursuit. The \$7.6 million verdict remains the largest ever rendered against the Los Angeles Police Department. (Soon after the complaint was filed, the California Legislature passed a law granting immunity to police during pursuits.)

McMurray later joined Robins Kaplan Miller & Ciresi, where he excelled in medical malpractice—at one point winning

a record \$4.1 million veterinary malpractice award. In 1999, he was considering starting his own practice when he got an offer to run the LA firm of the legendary Johnnie Cochran. There he took on a full docket of civil rights and police accountability cases. He represented a man whose father died after injuries sustained during his arrest by the LAPD. That \$1.3 million award allowed the victim's son to move to Atlanta and start his own barbershop. "Every year, he would invite me down for a barbecue," McMurray says. "He always told me how I had changed his life. He was forever grateful. And that's probably the first case where I felt that we have the ability to make people whole and make their lives better."

In late 2013, McMurray and Henriks launched their firm. They have what they describe as a good cop/bad cop working relationship. Henriks is the hard-hitting negotiator. McMurray calls her his "little dragon": "If I sic Yana on you, she's relentless."

"I'm the bad one," Henriks agrees. "Randy is always mellow. I do the bulldozer work. I'm the one who works on the case and puts the defense in the position where they want to talk to somebody to eventually settle. They're going a little crazy. And then they'll say, 'Can we talk to Randy?' He's very good at defusing even the most tense situation."

McMurray adds: "I've made my reputation being the person that gets people to talk to them. Whether it's a witness or an expert. If I can get them talking, I can get the case resolved."

"He'll turn the most conservative juror on your side," Henriks says. "I still can't figure out how he does it."

Henriks says she's most proud of representing Kamesha Davidson, a Black woman with schizophrenia who was shot by police in 2011 after her mother called 911 seeking emergency mental health assistance. Davidson survived and was charged with assaulting a police officer. She spent a year in jail, where she caught an infection that left her blind.

Before Henriks could sue LAPD for excessive use of force, however, she had to defend Davidson in the criminal assault case, which she did pro bono. "The charges that she was facing, the magnitude of it," Henrik says, "I was very nervous. I felt like the fate of this really very vulnerable woman ... I had that weight of the responsibility to basically step in and change something for her." Police said Davidson used a piece of metal conduit to attack the officer, but in crime scene photos it was clear the conduit was still attached to the wall. Charges were reduced, the assault with a deadly weapon charge dropped. Later, they won a half-million-dollar settlement for Davidson.

Cases like these have led Los Angeles County to create corrective action plans, which require officers to do more to involve mental health professionals in response to 911 calls. This is the sort of results the firm strives to achieve.

"If we can change the way the mentally ill are policed or handled by law enforcement—if we can make changes that affect the public generally, not just our client—if we can make changes to whole systems, those are the important cases," McMurray says.

In honor of his work on police accountability, the NAACP awarded McMurray with its Man of Valor legal award in 2011. "I am very proud of that," he says.

"Our motto is 'Changing the world one case at a time,'" he adds. "Yana and I do that together." 