

## Appellate Lawyer of the Week: Dan Stormer

**The veteran litigator argued on behalf of 28 California scientists who had challenged certain parts of a government background check by their contract employer, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.**

**Marcia Coyle**

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When he started practicing law in the 1970s, recalled Dan Stormer, he would not have been considered a "particularly respectable lawyer."

At the time, many judges were not only unsympathetic, but "downright mean" when faced with civil cases involving the poor — his first clients. "I can remember a judge walking into a rural courtroom and there were four lawyers lined up, including me," he said. "The judge went down the line. He shook everyone's hand. He got to me, looked at me and kept walking. It didn't help that I had an earring and a ponytail in 1974."

When he stood before the U.S. Supreme Court on Tuesday, Stormer's earring and ponytail were gone. So, too, were 36 years and any question about the respectability of Stormer, one of the country's top civil, constitutional and international human rights lawyers.

"I truly believe if you do what you like, you will become good at it," he said. "This is what I like doing. I've done civil rights and international human rights cases my entire career. It's all I do and all I ever wanted to do."

Stormer, founding partner of [Hadsell, Stormer, Keeny, Richardson & Renick](#), in Pasadena, Calif., was arguing Tuesday on behalf of 28 California scientists who had challenged certain parts of a government background check by their contract employer, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. In [NASA v. Nelson](#), the federal government is asking the justices to overturn a ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit. The appellate court found that specific questions on the government forms violated the scientists' right to informational privacy.

The case came to Stormer via Robert Nelson, the lead plaintiff. "Bobby Nelson has been a friend of mine for years," said Stormer. "We filed the complaint and argued it at every level." Stormer faced Acting Solicitor General Neal Katyal during argument, and both lawyers encountered skeptical questioning as they sparred over what limits, if any, exist on what the government can ask in its background investigations.

Stormer never expected to have as wonderful a career as he has had or to do as well financially, he said. Besides doing what he likes to do, the key to success, he said, is to work "really hard."

He came from a very poor family and started working at age 13. He worked through high school, college and law school. After law school graduation, he began his career as a public defender in Colorado. From there, he moved to representing migrant farm workers for several years and then state prisoners in Washington. He went back to helping farm workers and Native Americans with their legal problems until 1980 when he moved to Los Angeles. He spent three years there doing large-scale litigation at the Western Center on Law & Poverty. In 1984, he launched his own law firm and since then he has won dozens of multi-million-dollar verdicts and settlements as well as awards for public service.

Stormer does not work to the exclusion of everything else, he emphasized. "These days I ski 70 days a year. I always played sports and I coached my kids; I stalked my kids. If one played baseball, I became a baseball coach. If one took tennis, I became the tennis coach."

Last year, he wrote a "Letter to a Young Public Interest Lawyer" for the *Los Angeles Public Interest Law Journal* in which he called cynicism "the demon of a young lawyer's commitment" and urged those lawyers to fight it. "I fervently believe what I wrote," he said. "You have to follow what you truly desire to do. You've got to figure out what works for you. I see too many lawyers fall for the myth of respectability."

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