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Alumni Profiles:

On the case

Ronnie L. Edelman '75, government crime-fighter

Once you spend a little time talking with Ronnie L. Edelman '75, you feel better about the piece of your weekly paycheck that goes to Uncle Sam. And talking to this career Department of Justice attorney might make you feel a little safer as well. Edelman has worked in several capacities at Justice since she joined the department straight out of UB Law School, through the department's Honors Program for young attorneys.

"The Justice Department was known at that time as a way to get good training and the chance to assume a lot of responsibility much more quickly than if you went to a law firm," she says. "That turned out to be true. You could work on meaningful issues and feel you were accomplishing something."

Thus began a career in public service that has spanned cases from land fraud to deportation of World War II Nazis, from authoring an inter-agency counterterrorism plan to managing prosecution of domestic terrorists.

Since the fall of 1996, she has been principal deputy in the Justice Department's Terrorism and Violent Crime Section (TVCS), the government's lead counterterrorism agency. Its 45 attorneys are divided into three branches, covering

international terrorism, domestic terrorism and federal violent crimes.

"I make sure the trains run on time," she says. "At this stage in my career, my job is mostly management and supervision."

Sometimes it is difficult to tell exactly where violent crime ends and domestic terrorism begins, Edelman acknowledges.

"It is violence on a continuum. For example, with the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, no one was really sure whether that was terrorism — or just a big bomb. It turned out to be terrorism, of course."

Indeed, two attorneys from TVCS were on the government's trial team that successfully prosecuted Timothy McVeigh in that bombing, with support from a third TVCS attorney in Washington.

But day-to-day prosecution needs a context, and one enormous — and important — project for which Edelman was largely responsible was managing and co-authoring Attorney General Janet Reno's five-year counterterrorism and technology crime strategy.

"We had to try to assess where the government was at the time this was written, what its goals should be, how it should get there, and put together a road map of various



Heavy equipment is used to remove debris from the front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City Friday, April 21, 1995. (AP Photo/David Glass)

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things that needed to be done,” Edelman says.

“We reached out to other agencies involved in counterterrorism, and put together a series of working groups. These groups considered a whole range of issues: what the threats were, how state and local authorities were responding, issues of international terrorism and how we should augment our capabilities, looking at R&D, looking a little at infrastructure issues.

“Trying to get 26 federal agencies to sign onto a 200-page position paper, then design and plan its implementation, was very intensive and an incredible learning experience.” The five-year plan was filed on Dec. 30, 1997.

Edelman began her prosecutorial career in fraud, that age-old staple of human mischief. Working for seven years in the department’s

Fraud Section, she litigated cases involving land, commodities and securities fraud.

“We tended to do the cases that various U.S. attorney’s offices cannot do, do not want to do, or need help with,” she says. They were usually very large cases, she says, such as the two huge land-fraud cases in Arizona that necessitated her living there for four to six months at a stretch.

That period also included work in the Government Regulatory Branch, which she served for a time as acting chief. The job there: securities fraud, as well as regulation of the oil and energy fields.

A move to the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) followed in 1982. The office handles denaturalization and deportation cases against World War II. Nazis. “It hasn’t more than 10 to 12 lawyers

and seven or eight historians,” Edelman says. “You need to reconstruct the historical record as pertains to that period. It was interesting working with historians. All of the work is civil work, so I learned all about civil litigation in those years.”

At OSI, she also worked on a special project for almost a year, following an investigation of the allegedly compromised operation of the FBI crime lab. “We formed a task force to try to identify what cases would be impacted by these allegations at the federal, state and local levels,” Edelman says. “We had to figure out what approach we should take to policy considerations, if it was necessary to reopen certain cases, and what we should do in cases that had not yet been indicted.”

After a quarter-century in-

side the government’s crime-fighting apparatus, Edelman says the work remains a challenge and a source of endless fascination.

“The issues are intriguing,” she says. “I feel that I am doing significant, meaningful work. The people I work with have a level of professional expertise and a level of professionalism that is very high. This is not a place where people come and stay and bide their time. I find it a very vital place to work.”

She adds, as well, that she has found a “family-friendly” work atmosphere — to a point. “A good part of my career with Justice, I have worked part time,” she says, “and I have worked a three-quarters-time schedule for most of my time at OSI. I think the government has been a leader in this area.”