

# Forging an Ethical Path

As its first general counsel, Stacie Pittell '84 is helping shape a new District of Columbia ethics board.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

FOR YEARS, STACIE PITTELL '84 HAS CARVED a path in secure and well-established roles in public investigations. After graduating from Rochester as a double major in philosophy and English, and earning a JD at American University, she began her legal career as a prosecutor in the King's County District Attorney's office in Brooklyn, N.Y. She spent 15 years at the New York City Department of Investigation, and in 2008, moved to Washington, D.C., to become the assistant inspector general for investigations.

This past fall, she dove into something new—in essence, a public sector start-up—when she accepted the position of general counsel for the brand new District of Columbia Board of Ethics and Government Accountability.

"I was both intrigued and excited by the idea of starting up a new agency," she says of her move. "The board serves an important function—to restore the public's confidence in the integrity of our local government—and I wanted to be part of making that happen."

The three-member ethics board comes after a spate of highly publicized investigations and improprieties. A campaign aide to the mayor, as well as two city council members, have been tied to separate incidents in the past couple of years. Pittell, refraining from comment on any particulars, says "misconduct is the exception, rather than the rule" and that government needs to be more accountable to citizens and more transparent.

The District has long faced unique hurdles in prosecuting crimes in local government. As the nation's capitol, it's owned by the federal government. In 1973, Congress granted the city limited autonomy under the Home Rule Act.

But the law included several restrictions on the ability of local officials to prosecute crime. The city has no elected district attorney, for example, to prosecute serious offenses. Only the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia can do that.

For years, some activists have criticized the office—the only U.S. attorney's office



**FOLLOW THE MONEY?** Misconduct "usually comes down to money," says Pittell, adding that it can have a big impact on what's left for vital city services.

responsible for prosecuting local and well as federal offenses—for failing to prosecute many offenses local officials have referred there.

According to Mike DeBonis, who covers

District politics for the *Washington Post*, the new board won't address complaints about the U.S. attorney's office entirely—full prosecutorial authority remains in that office and it requires a higher standard of

evidence than the board—but the board will be able to extract stiff administrative penalties and fines. He adds that among the most important aspects of the board is that it has “a dedicated staff to investigate ethics complaints.”

Leading that staff of investigators is Pittell.

“I’m not only new, I’m the first general counsel,” she says, underscoring just how much is yet to be determined. A few things are certain, however, and one is that Pittell will act as both an investigator and a prosecutor. She’ll oversee investigations of misconduct allegations, and in cases where the evidence warrants it, bring cases into open adversarial hearings before the board.

“When we got Stacie, it was our greatest coup,” says Darrin Sobin, the former D.C. assistant attorney general who’s now the board’s first executive director. “She brought many years of investigative experience, and it really says something about her character that she was willing to take a chance on a start-up organization, to do something she felt was important to the people of the District.”

The board also provides ethics advice and training, meaning that Pittell, as general counsel, will perform those roles as well. They’re new to her, but they’re ones she’s glad to take on. “I’ve never been in that kind of position before, where you see people at the front end,” she says. “They want to do the right thing. And they’d rather not do it than do the wrong thing.”

Pittell estimates that as of this spring, the board gets about two requests for advice on any given day. “As we get our name out there,” she says, “it’s picking up.”

The board publishes all its formal opinions on its website. Pittell believes the board’s open operations will encourage public confidence. She notes that the board’s monthly public meetings, have been well attended so far. “People come and participate,” she says. “We post a written agenda beforehand, we have issues that we put out, and people have an opportunity to come and speak. We’ve gotten good ideas from people.”

The stakes for the board’s success are high. In D.C.—a city that can’t pass its budget without the approval of Congress—political corruption always brings with it the risk of more federal intervention.

Pittell puts it starkly. “You don’t want to have problem after problem and scandal after scandal and have the federal government look at you and say, ‘You can’t run your own city.’” 

## In the News

### JO ANNE PEDRO-CARROLL ’84 (PHD) LENDS HELPING HAND ON SESAME STREET

*Sesame Street*’s Abby Cadabby got some solid advice on coping with her parents’ divorce from clinical psychologist **Jo Anne Pedro-Carroll** ’84 (PhD). Now she’s sharing that advice with her young fans.

An expert on children and divorce, Pedro-Carroll was hired as a consultant to Sesame Workshop, the digital educational initiative affiliated with the classic PBS children’s television show *Sesame Street*. Pedro-Carroll was among four experts who shaped the multimedia project “Little Children, Big Challenges: Divorce.” The project, designed for children ages two to eight, includes resources for parents, such as a guide and online toolkit, as well as for children.

In a DVD and a storybook, the muppet Abby Cadabby—who’s lived alongside Big Bird and friends on *Sesame Street* since 2006—shares with her young fans her feelings and experiences before, during, and after her parents’ divorce.

Pedro-Carroll is the author of the 2010 book *Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive Through Divorce* (Penguin).



**HOW SHE GOT TO SESAME STREET:** Pedro-Carroll, an expert on children and divorce, wrote an award-winning book that captured the attention of the nonprofit Sesame Workshop.

### NORMAN NEUREITER ’52 HONORED BY AUSTRIAN GOVERNMENT

**Norman Neureiter** ’52 has been awarded the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art. The award, bestowed by the Austrian government, recognized Neureiter for his work with the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, founded in 1972 to bring scientists across the Cold War divide together to address global problems. The institute, which today includes member nations from five continents, is located near Vienna.

Neureiter, a chemist and the acting director of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Center for Science, Technology, and Security Policy, was honored by the Japanese government in 2011. He received the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star decoration, in recognition of his work promoting cooperation between the United States and Japan in science.

### AT CARNEGIE HALL, AN EASTMAN COLLABORATION

Carnegie Hall was the stage for an Eastman artistic reunion this spring. In April, classical guitarist **Peter Fletcher** ’95E (MM) performed *Diary of a Camino*, by **Jeremy Gill** ’96E, as part of a concert honoring the 120th anniversary of the birth of composer Federico Mompou. Gill wrote the piece for Fletcher, who recorded *Federico Mompou: Guitar Works* (Centaur) in 2002. *Diary of a Camino* was inspired by a walk Gill took along the Camino Francés—an ancient pilgrimage route to the Galician city of Santiago de Compostela, where Mompou lectured.

In program notes, which Fletcher posted on his blog at [www.peterfletcher.com/blog](http://www.peterfletcher.com/blog), Gill writes: “Beginning in Samos, at its imposing medieval monastery, I walked the Camino to Santiago de Compostela, each day keeping a sonic diary of the trip. Besides the morning bells at the monastery of Samos (O mosteiro de Samos), which symbolically began my journey (and begins this work), my ‘entries’ included notations of birds (paxaros), evening bells (campás no serán), a hypnotically asymmetrical ticking clock (reloxo), and musical depictions of fog and wind (brétema e vento), double rainbows (arcos da vella), and a solitary willow (un salgueiro solitario) . . . I assembled the work from these sketches.”