

## SHEILA COLE

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“Fabulous!” That was the reaction of the staff at PERB when we learned that the New York State Senate had confirmed Governor David Paterson’s nomination of Sheila Cole as a per diem member of the Board on December 15, 2008. Interestingly, it’s also the same word that Sheila uttered when recently asked to describe her approximately six and one-half year tenure on the Board. And it’s more than coincidence.

Sheila majored in science and received her B.S. degree from Cornell University. After four years of teaching high school science, Sheila enrolled at Albany Law School, where she earned her J.D. degree. She then embarked on what would become a stellar full-time career as an arbitrator of collective bargaining disputes in the public and private sectors. Sheila also has served as an arbitrator, hearing officer and mediator in various types of employment matters, such as discrimination cases and discipline and discharge proceedings pursuant to the state Education Law. Sheila has arbitrated cases in a wide range of industries, including state and local government, transportation, manufacturing, health care and nuclear energy. Sheila is also a member of the National Academy of Arbitrators, the College of Labor and Employment Lawyers and the American Bar Association. She is a former secretary of the New York State Bar Association’s labor and employment law section and currently serves as co-chair of its arbitration committee and as a member of its executive committee.

Sheila describes her transition from a cello-playing science teacher to a labor relations arbitrator as “incredibly fortunate”. She remains honored at being chosen by employers and employee organizations to make extremely important decisions directly affecting the lives and livelihood of individuals. That Sheila continues to find her responsibilities satisfying as well only adds to her resolve always to search for the correct outcome and render the correct decision in every matter before her.

Sheila admits to a mix of what she calls both “altruistic” and “somewhat selfish” reasons for joining the Board. Her desire to “give something back” is what primarily motivated her to accept her nomination. She had long lamented the lack of opportunity to do pro bono work as a labor relations neutral and viewed the Board position as one way of satisfying her desire to “give back.” As to her second reason, it is no secret that an arbitrator’s professional life often can be solitary and intellectually isolating. Sheila viewed the chance to work on a decision together with colleagues as a tremendous opportunity. Looking back on her years as a Board member, Sheila noted that: “Working directly with colleagues on a decision was intellectually satisfying in a way that differs from the solitary drafting of a decision as an arbitrator.”

Sheila’s tenure on the Board was devoted to “getting it right” and doing the right thing. While as a general matter drafts of Board decisions are prepared for the per diem Board members by agency staff, Sheila often noted that: “The draft of a decision is typically not the end of the matter, but it is only the beginning.” The collaborative

process that follows the initial draft and that ultimately results in a decision agreed upon by all members of the Board is one that Sheila found extremely rewarding.

Of course Sheila fit in exceedingly well with what she characterized as the “family-like” culture of the agency. She identifies her time working closely with prior Board Chair Jerome Lefkowitz as her most rewarding experience, noting that “His intellect and brilliance are surpassed only by his kindness and moral compass.” Sheila describes her years on the Board as “The joy of her professional life.”

Speaking of family, Sheila’s eyes light up when she speaks of enjoying free time with her husband, their two daughters, grandchildren and her mother. Years of travel as an arbitrator have prepared her well for the bicoastal family visits to California, Maine and Florida. When she is not traveling with her family (and even sometimes when she is), Sheila enjoys the outdoors. She may even be found snowshoeing, kayaking and hiking.

The agency remains grateful for Sheila’s integrity, neutrality and scholarship. May she and her family enjoy many more years of good health, happiness and fulfillments.

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