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- **S.F. lawyer honored for battling domestic violence**

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by [amanda pazornik](#), staff writer

Minouche Kandel doesn't consider herself a rarity among attorneys just because she has chosen a career in public-interest law.

After all, she's in good company — President Barack Obama was a fellow classmate at Harvard Law School, Class of 1991.

“Now he's providing the ultimate public service,” Kandel says.



**Minouche Kandel**

In the sphere of domestic violence, so is she.

Recently named one of the California attorneys of the year by a noted lawyer publication, Kandel works at Bay Area Legal Aid, which provides civil legal services — for free — to low-income individuals and families.

Its specialties are domestic violence prevention, health care access, economic security and housing law.

A San Francisco resident and Temple Emanu-El member, Kandel splits her time between representing clients (primarily in domestic violence cases) and working on legal steps to improve existing laws.

“I like the combination,” Kandel says. “When you're working with real people, it helps you identify the gaps in policies.”

Her expertise in issues of domestic violence reaches beyond her 12 years of service at Bay Area Legal Aid.

Kandel started volunteering with Shalom Bayit more than 10 years ago, giving presentations about the legal side of domestic violence. She used to serve on the nonprofit's advisory board and currently makes herself available for legal consultation.

"I'm so impressed with how creative [Shalom Bayit] is with its clients," Kandel says of the Oakland-based agency dedicated to ending domestic violence in the Jewish community. "It's a nice opportunity to combine my work with domestic violence and my connection to the Jewish community."

The daughter of Holocaust refugees, Kandel attributes her career in social justice to her parents' saga. Her father, Eric Richard Kandel, fled Nazi Austria with his family; her mother, Denise Bystryn Kandel, hid in a Catholic boarding school in France during World War II.

"I've seen how people fighting against injustice enabled me to be born," Kandel says. "[My parents] would never have survived without complete strangers. I'm paying back that debt."

Eric Kandel received a 2000 Nobel Prize for his research on the physiological basis of memory storage in neurons. Though he was born in Austria, Eric Kandel referred to his prize as a "Jewish-American Nobel" — a tribute to the many opportunities afforded to him when he came to the United States.

Cognizant of the opportunities her father had, Kandel laments that things are often quite the opposite for her clients. "I work with a lot of battered immigrant women who are not being given the same opportunities he had," she says.

Originally from New York, Kandel pursued a career in social justice from the get-go, with a focus on women's issues. Before joining Bay Area Legal Aid, she spent four years working on legal issues for the Support Network for Battered Women in Sunnyvale.

For her work with what she calls "domestic violence survivors," Kandel was chosen as a winner of a prestigious CLAY award (California Lawyer Attorneys of the Year) by California Lawyer magazine. Forty-three attorneys were honored for extraordinary achievements in 2008, with Kandel being named in the category of public interest law.

On behalf of a battered woman seeking a temporary restraining order, Kandel won a state appellate court ruling that led to 2008 legislation requiring trial judges who deny a temporary restraining order to explain their decision.

Kandel was also the recent recipient of the 2009 Family Law award from the Legal Aid Association of California.

"At any job, you have good days and bad days," Kandel says. "Bay Area Legal Aid values doing in-depth, time-consuming representation for clients so we can help them and their children escape the violence."