Mohave County Public Defender John Pecchia (from left) is interviewed along with Arizona Public Defenders Association 2011 award winners Legal Secretary Elaine Hudson and Deputy Public Defender Barshaunda Robinson Thursday, July 7, at the County Administration Building in Kingman.

Mohave County Public Defender’s Office attorney, legal secretary honored with state awards

KINGMAN – Two Mohave County Public Defender’s Office staff members were honored with state awards during the annual conference of the Arizona Public Defenders Association (APDA) in June.

Deputy Public Defender Barshaunda Robinson was presented the organization’s Rising Star Award and Legal Secretary Elaine Hudson received the Outstanding Administrative Professional Award.

According to the Association’s website, the APDA is “a non-profit corporation comprised of all county, city, federal and tribal indigent representation offices and programs in the state.”

Out of the close to 1,400 members, the group presented 14 individual awards in six categories, Mohave County Public Defender John Pecchia said. “And two of the winners are from Mohave County.”

Pecchia, who is a member of the APDA Board of Directors, nominate the two winners.

The “25 or so Board members” discussed the merits of each nominee, he said. “Barshaunda has been with us going on four years. I’ve only been here (Public Defender’s Office) for one year. Over that year, I have watched her in court. She shows skills well beyond someone with her years of service. She is one tough trial attorney. She gets
successful results because she stays focused. That is what we are looking for – high-quality representation. She, like the rest of the office, provides it. She qualified statewide for this award and the rest of the Board of Directors agreed.”

Pecchia kept the award a secret from Robinson until just before the presentation.

“I was definitely surprised,” Robinson said. “I was told probably about 10 minutes before” the presentation “that I would be receiving an award. It was exciting and a little embarrassing, mostly because I don’t have a lot of experience. I was licensed in 2008. It is the practice of law; so you are learning everything as you are going through it.

“But I worked really hard and I am very excited about it,” she said.

Robinson, who earned her degree at the University of Cincinnati College of Law, lives in Kingman.

“I moved here in 2007,” she said. “I was born and raised in Chicago and went to law school in Ohio.” When she arrived in Kingman, “I got involved with the Foster Care Review Board in another county (Yavapai) because of the conflict of interest that would have existed if I did that locally.”

She also was on the Coconino County Foster Care Review Board until it closed last year.

“I nominated Elaine for the (Outstanding Administrative Professional) award,” Pecchia said. “She has been with the office since 2003. There has been an incredible turnover in our secretarial staff. Elaine has been responsible for training everyone. She knows how all the courts work. On top of doing the training, doing her job and taking phone calls, she makes sure the attorneys show up and are in the right court on the day they are scheduled. It is incredible what she does and I just don’t know how she does it. She keeps everything flowing smoothly. To have someone that dedicated to what we do is exceptional. She deserves the award and the other Board members agreed wholeheartedly.”

Hudson said she didn't want to go to the APDA conference as she believed she could get a lot of work out of the way while the others were away attending it.

“They told me I needed to go,” she said. “I said ‘Let someone else go.’ Then they alerted me that I needed to be there because I was going to get the award.”

Hudson moved from Indiana to Kingman in 1982.

“I worked for Citizens Communications/Frontier Communications for 20 years,” she said. “Then they reorganized, leaving me looking for another opportunity. The Public Defender’s Office position opened up and I came aboard in January of 2003.

“When I first came to the county, there were seven (in the Public Defender’s Office) secretarial staff plus two or three reception positions. Now, we are down to three secretaries and one at the front desk.... Plus, the workload has increased. We prioritize. That’s how we get by.”

Hudson’s husband taught in the Kingman high schools for “27 years,” she said. “Now he’s retired. Back then our community involvement was with the schools; but now we keep involved with our family and church.”

The department presently handles an incredible caseload, Pecchia said. “And, over the last four or five months, that has increased dramatically. When I came here (to the county), I was under the impression the seriousness of the cases may not be what I was used to in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Now, all of a sudden, every attorney has a homicide to deal with in one shape or another.
“It has been an incredible cavalcade of serious cases,” he said. “We do have the attorneys who have the ability to deal with these cases; but we are making sure they get training. That’s what the APDA does. We also do in-house training, which can be very specific to unique forensic sciences, cross examining and other issues. We are trying to shorten the experience level so young attorneys can go into court and perform like professionals with many years of experience – of which Barshaunda is a wonderful example.”

Pecchia credits support staff for much of the department’s success.

“They make sure everything is where it is supposed to be,” he said. “We try to do everything electronically, but we still need the paper with us in court.”

“I absolutely love my job,” Robinson said. “This is something that I want to do. When people think of the title ‘public defender,’ there is some negative connotation to it. The people in our office are dedicated to providing quality legal services to people who cannot afford to hire a private attorney. We are all an important part of what goes on” in the justice system. “People don’t get to see what actually goes on behind closed doors. We all work really hard for our clients. This country was founded on protecting the rights of individuals.” The right to a defense “is the most important right in the criminal justice system.”

“She does a great job,” Hudson said. “All of our attorneys do wonderful work. If I had to pick one to represent me, I could pick any one of them. They all are very dedicated, knowledgeable and do a great job.”

The scales of justice have to balance, Robinson said. “The people I represent are people; not just a name, defendant, someone charged with a crime. They are somebody’s child, sibling, parent and I feel like that is an important part of what I do. We are not doing this for the money. We are doing it because it is something we really want to do.”

Pecchia said he is “very happy” with his choice to come to Mohave County.

“We are criminal defense attorneys and there is no higher calling, especially when it is done in the public service,” he said. “That is what we have chosen for our careers and why we are here. The entire office takes pride in the service we provide the citizens of Mohave County.”