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Poised and Playful in the Legal Fast Lane

By JAN HOFFMAN

FOR an overachiever, Preeta D. Bansal is unusually merry. That's the luxury of one whose mind is efficient as well as dazzling, so that by day's end, she can indeed skip out of the office. "There are day campers and sleep-away campers," Ms. Bansal said, referring to dedication to work. "I've always been a day camper."

That even seems accurate, which is all the more remarkable, given that Ms. Bansal has moved from childhood in India, to girlhood in Lincoln, Neb., to her current position as New York State's Solicitor General — with pit stops at Harvard, the Supreme Court and the Clinton White House — in just 33 breathless years.

We caught up with her at her Upper West Side apartment, fresh from an appearance last week before the Court of Appeals, New York's top court, defending a law that withholds paychecks from legislators until they pass a budget. As Solicitor General, appointed by Attorney General Elliot L. Spitzer, she is the state's leading legal intellect, overseeing 40 lawyers and representing New York in state and Federal appellate courts on issues from constitutional interpretation to affirmative action.

Yet for someone who at the baby-lawyer age of 27 was coaching Stephen G. Breyer, then a Federal appeals judge, on his testimony as the White House nominee to the Supreme Court, Ms. Bansal comes across as surprisingly relaxed, poised and playful. She frequently talks about "fun," not exactly the first word associated with someone who entered Harvard at 16.

As a child, Ms. Bansal moved with her family to Lincoln, where her father pursued a doctorate in civil engineering and her mother became a gubernatorial adviser on social welfare and health care. "The only Indians I knew in Nebraska were my siblings," she said. "There were no outlets for feelings of difference, so I spent more of school years fitting in rather than fitting apart."

Ms. Bansal was driven less by any specific career ambition than by the quest to find a good parking space for her restless brilliance. (She has been called a legal superstar, "smarter than the smart lawyers.") A nimble, unorthodox thinker interested in art and literature, she was attracted to the law's blend of the philosophical and the pragmatic.

Harvard Law School dismayed her. "It was stifling, narrow and more of a professional school, with the gunning mentality," she said. "I didn't know what all those students were looking for at the end of the



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Preeta D. Bansal is now New York State's Solicitor General.

rainbow." She was seen as comparatively reluctant, the student who at the last moment dashed off the best paper, whose professors cajoled her into joining Law Review.

She clerked for James L. Oakes, then Chief Judge of the United States Circuit Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, and next entered law's sanctum sanctorum, clerking on the Supreme Court, for Justice John Paul Stevens. "I didn't realize what a privileged position it was until I came out," said Ms. Bansal, who had to be persuaded to apply. "But it was a really fun year."

Highlights? "Spending two or three hours every day with Justice Stevens," she replied. "I left at 6 P.M. to work out," she said. "I wasn't like the guys who lived and breathed the Court, sending E-mails at 2 A.M. They couldn't figure me out either." Tidbit: "Justice O'Connor invited the women clerks to her regular aerobics class, and it was understood that one should go. Very low impact."

MS. BANSAL joined the Washington office of Arnold & Porter, focusing on First Amendment cases. Next stop, public service. At the Department of Justice she rose in about five minutes to senior counsel, evaluating policy about television violence and violence against women. She was borrowed by the White House Counsel's office, where she toiled on health care task force litigation (major eye roll) and judicial nominations.

"I was surprised at how gritty it was," Ms. Bansal said. "It wasn't high-minded legal analysis. It wasn't

thoughtful. It was about how to pack age a thoughtful person into a few second sound bite."

She had a blast, having fallen in with international jet-setters from the World Bank and diplomatic offices. She invested in a serious table that seats 12 and gave weekly dinner parties, doing her own cooking. ("It's so different in New York," she said. "People give fewer dinner parties and they're completely catered!") She moved to Justice's antitrust division, specializing in international enforcement of copyright laws.

She again grew restless. Washington felt too comfortable, her work too theoretical. She relocated to New York to practice with the First Amendment lawyer Robert D. Sack, who has since become a Federal appeals judge.

After a rough adjustment, she's been having fun again. Dating is just fine and she has a belief, based on her mother's example, that work and family don't have to conflict. ("You think I'm naïve, right?") There is even a sense of calm, following a "spiritual epiphany" while staring at the Pietà.

"I realized I wasn't the center of my own universe and I stopped being my own worst critic," Ms. Bansal said. "I understand life is not a trajectory and I'm not in a waiting period. I stopped obsessing about where it was leading and decided I couldn't figure it all out in advance."

So she allowed Mr. Spitzer to successfully pitch her the job of Solicitor General, as a mixture of highbrow theory and real-world impact. It's the perfect blend, for now.

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