



**STANDING: STACEY BELLI, GINA MENDOLA LONGARZO, FRANCESCA MENDOLA**  
**SITTING: ASHLEY WHITNEY, KARA MACKENZIE**

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# THE LAW OFFICES OF GINA MENDOLA LONGARZO, L.L.C.

By Dan Baldwin

“We’re a niche boutique firm primarily representing public employees, mostly police officers,” says Gina Mendola Longarzo, founder of the Law Offices of Gina Mendola Longarzo, L.L.C. The firm focuses on defending people charged in labor investigations and charged with criminal offenses in federal, state and municipal court. Their practice areas are appellate practice, civil litigation, civil rights, criminal defense and general practice in New Jersey and parts of New York.

The firm has represented clients in numerous high-profile, complex and cutting edge cases in federal and state courts. Many have resulted in granting new trials, reversals of conviction and the publishing of legal opinions in different areas of the law. Most of the firm’s clients are police officers, men and women in law enforcement, and public employees, teachers, and court clerks.

“It’s much harder to represent a plaintiff who is a public employee than a private employee because with public entities you have to go through a lot of hoops and hurdles to get a settlement. They have to present it to their town counsel or the powers that be in the municipality or the county or the

state. You have to get approval for any settlement, and there’s a lot more transparency than with a private company. It’s more difficult to settle these cases. You have the insurance carrier carrying the insurance for the municipal entities involved. They all have a say in whether or not to settle. Sometimes there’s a consent policy so the municipality has to consent to what the insurance carrier wants to pay. It’s tough,” she says.

She considers a recent verdict in a reverse discrimination case the pinnacle of her career. The firm represented two white corrections officers who claimed there were African American supervisors discriminating against them. The case lasted several years without a settlement. It eventually went to trial for five weeks. The verdict was about \$7 million dollars in punitive and compensatory damages for the firm’s clients. “The jury came back quickly, considering how long the trial lasted. It was an amazing case. We were very proud at the end. These gentlemen got to tell their story, and the jury believed in them,” Longarzo says. Those plaintiffs were most happy about “getting their names back” and restoring their professional reputation as they repeatedly stated at the end of the trial.



### "WE'RE A GOOD FIT."

The Law Offices of Gina Mendola Longarzo has considerable experience with representing public employees and with civil rights law. Longarzo says that the firm's depth of experience supports a concerned and caring attitude. "We really do care about our clients. We care about helping them and we're actually pretty close. We try to have a close relationship with our clients. We always put their interests first whether or not it means we get a higher retainer. Our philosophy is that if we do a good job for them and put them in a better place, they're going to come back to us and refer people to us." Many clients "attorney shop" to see which firm and which group of people are a good fit for their needs and their personalities. Longarzo says, "I always tell people to 'trust your gut.' If we connect, if you have a good vibe, use me. If not, don't worry about it – no strings attached."

"We are a 'good fit' because we all work as a team," she says. The team consists of Longarzo, partner Kara A. MacKenzie, associate Francesca Mendola, paralegal Ashley Whitney, law clerk Justine Abrams, and billing manager Stacey Belli. She keeps the practice small and growing gracefully. "We have a very laid back office. Work gets done. If a working mom has to stay home with a sick child, that's okay because I know she will also make sure her work for the office gets done. We are a tight-knit group, which works well for the firm and equally well for our clients," Longarzo says.

Staying current with law



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"You gotta do what you love. If you do, it doesn't seem like work."



that is in a state of constant change keeps the team busy and alert. It's a challenge to keep up with the civil rights legislation, pension laws for public employees, and changes in trends over the years. "We pay very close attention to the new employment laws coming out. Pension reform is a very big deal in the State of New Jersey. Because a lot of our clients are public employees, a lot of these laws will affect their pension rights and their benefits, so we really try to stay on top of everything. We want to make sure we give our clients the most up-to-date advice that we can," Longarzo says.

#### **"YOU GOTTA LOVE WHAT YOU DO."**

Longarzo graduated cum laude from her high school, attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and graduated cum laude and was on the Law Review at Seton Hall Law School.

She clerked for a judge in criminal court in 1995-96 and then moved on to a law firm in downtown Newark, N.J. for about a year. She gained considerable trial experience at that time. "My first week there I was thrown into doing trial work, which was the best way to do it, I think," she says.

Longarzo left for a five-year period at another firm where she gained more trial experience. She worked for one year as an adjunct professor at Seton Hall Law School and then went to another law firm for about five years. Longarzo was a partner, but she left because she felt the relationship wasn't a good fit with that firm. By then she had worked for three different firms

and was ready to go out on her own. With the encouragement of her parents and a lot of colleagues, she made the move. "I was very nervous. We had a tiny office for just me and my paralegal. We slowly grew and it's been wonderful," she says.

Longarzo is admitted to practice in New Jersey and New York; the U.S. District Court, District of New Jersey; U.S. Court of Appeals, Third Circuit; and U.S. District Court, Southern and Eastern Districts of New York. She is a member of the Morris County and American Bar Associations; the New Jersey Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers; and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. She is rated AV by Martindale-Hubbell.

Longarzo says, "You gotta do what you love. If you do, it doesn't seem like work. Good comes back to good. When you do something good for your clients and try to help them in the right way, it comes back to you tenfold and that leads directly to the best part of any case - when the plaintiff goes from being the victim to the person who is the victor."

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