Professional affiliations: Serves on board of directors of the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union, involved with American Trial Lawyers Association, Women's Trial Lawyers Caucus, American Bar Association and the National Lawyers Guild.

Hobbies: Reading biographies, going to concerts, camping and hiking.

LaVoie's route to law school was ultimately by way of a career in dental hygiene. In her second year of college at the Hartford College for Women, her father died. Worried about her future financial security, she decided to switch careers.

"Instead of pursuing a liberal arts degree, I decided to learn a skill," she said.

In 1976, LaVoie completed a bachelor of science degree in dental hygiene, graduating with honors. The skill enabled her to support herself as she kept up her education. With income from her work as a dental hygienist, she was able continue to study, earning a master's degree in public administration.

Continuing in dental hygiene, she became a faculty member in the University of Bridgeport's dental hygiene program. Finally, in her mid-20s, her thoughts returned to law, and she enrolled at the University of Bridgeport School of Law.

"I don't regret the dental hygiene background," she said. "It enabled me to pursue my educational goals."

Even now she maintains contact with her former profession as a member of the board of directors of Professional Learning Services, a firm that provides continuing education programs for workers in the dental health field. In that capacity, she speaks to dental health professionals on legal issues that affect them.

LaVoie worked in dental hygiene and continued to teach while attending law school in the evenings. In 1984, she received that long-sought-after law degree.

"I've always been socially active, socially conscious," she said. "Not only did law give me a sense of empowerment as a woman, as a person, I also knew I was interested in helping other people feel that way."

She also wanted to work as a trial lawyer. She took a job in Ridgefield in 1985 with the William M. Laviano law firm. She argued discrimination, employment and civil rights cases, along with other types of cases, in federal and state courts.

She learned about the community lawyer opening from an advertisement in the Connecticut Law Tribune. The job intrigued her, and she said she was ready for a change.

"I like challenges. It's brand new. There's not a lot of pattern here that says: This is what a community advocate is.

"The challenge is to develop the position. Winsted is the first community to have this kind of project — where a lawyer is being retained and financed to service the public."

LaVoie has been in the position now for two weeks and has been attending selectmen's and zoning meetings to learn about

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