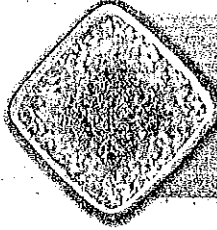




COMFORTING

Mac & Cheese conjures up childhood memories, **F1**



THRILLER

UConn needs OT to beat Notre Dame 75-74, **D1**



TODAY
PARTLY SUNNY



HIGH 41 LOW 29
DETAILS, PAGE B8

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SUPER LAWYERS



This pair met their match in the courtroom

By Phil Helsel
Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Three years out of college, Tara Knight began her law practice out of a small, cheap office on Williams Street, overlooking the train tracks that occasionally interrupted her discussions with clients. She didn't have a secretary, a staff or even an office computer. Her first

case that went to trial was defending a Derby man accused of brutally beating his girlfriend, almost killing her and Knight lost. "It was upsetting, but I had cases that very next day," said Knight, now a partner of Knight, Conway & Cerretti LLC in New Haven. "I went in the very next day to make sure everyone knew that I wasn't going to let me get me down. It was devastating." That was in 1997. This year, Con-

necticut Magazine named her a "Super Lawyer" and her name is routinely mentioned among the top criminal defense attorneys in the area. But another "Super Lawyer" isn't hard to find — she married high-profile New Haven lawyer Hugh F. Keefe of Lynch, Traub, Keefe and Errante last year. Keefe has been on the "who's who" list of criminal defense attorneys for years, having been exposed to the limelight when he helped represent

members of the Black Panthers in the New Haven murder trial in the late '60s. So Keefe says the fact that he was listed as a "Super Lawyer" by the magazine, which is owned by the New Haven Register's parent company, as well as being named as one of the five best lawyers in the state in 1990 and again in 2001, is less of a surprise. See Super Lawyers, A7

Super Lawyers: Knight's legal work lauded

Continued from A1

an accomplishment. Keefe said that his wife deserves a greater level of respect because she rose to the top in a male-dominated industry.

"The criminal trial lawyer bar has been virtually exclusively male since its beginning," Keefe said. "She has broken into the field and formed an exclusively criminal defense firm; she's the only woman to do that."

Keefe and Knight were engaged in December 2004 and they married in September in Boston.

"She's brilliant; she's witty, she's animated," Keefe said. "She's beautiful — what else is there?"

Both were previously married once, but divorced.

Keefe and Knight knew each other for years, but were first thrown together professionally when they represented the infamous former New London lawyer Beth Carpenter, who was convicted in 2002 of hiring a hit man to kill her brother-in-law in East Lyme and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Knight, a graduate of Fairfield University and later Suffolk University in Boston, downplays the magazine's designation — "There are public defenders working in the pits every day, pulling rabbits out of their hats," she says — but recognition doesn't begin or with her inclusion on the

magazine's top-lawyer list.

She was elected by her peers to serve as president of the Connecticut Criminal Defense Lawyers Association; she became one of only two women criminal defense attorneys listed in the "The Best Lawyers in America," a biennial publication that bills itself as the pre-eminent referral guide to the legal profession in the country, and was listed in New York Magazine's "The New York Area's Best Lawyers, A Definitive Guide To Legal Representation in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut."

Together, Knight and Keefe were part of a three-lawyer team that forced the state to virtually throw out its cases against Vietnamese immigrants Thu Dang, Tam Ha and Meng Le, who were accused of growing and storing almost \$4 million worth of marijuana in their West Haven homes, because of suspect search-and-seizure techniques used by police.

She also won an acquittal for Wilbert Howard of Ansonia last month, who was accused along with his wife of embezzling almost \$400,000 from an elderly Seymour man as he lay stricken with Parkinson's disease last month.

But Knight says she still believes in the idealistic notions that got her into criminal defense work in the first place: that abuse of prosecutorial power is inexcusable, and that every accused

killer, thief or drug dealer has some redeeming qualities.

"I've got a soft spot in my heart for underdogs," she said. "Someone once said: 'The good guys aren't so good and the bad guys aren't so bad,' and I believe that."

Keefe said he tells his students at Yale Law School, where he has taught trial practice for 20 years, that young lawyers should worry less about the paycheck and more about their reputations at first.

"Don't worry about the money — money will take care of itself," Keefe said. "The important thing is to create a reputation. Do cases for nothing, or become a special public defender... you get paid a pittance, but if you do a good job, word will get around."

It also helps if you get a few breaks along the way. Keefe, after serving a stint in the Army

and being hired by the firm where he now is a managing partner, was picked to be local counsel in the Black Panther trial in New Haven. Several members of the Black Panthers, including its chairman, Bobby Seale, were accused of killing a police informant; Seale was not convicted, but others involved reached plea agreements sparing them long sentences.

"I was just a young kid, but I was local counsel for some national attorneys," Keefe said. "I think that went a long way towards kicking my career off."

But Knight said that the big names aren't always the most rewarding cases.

"The cases you're most proud of are the ones that don't get a lot of attention," Knight said. "It's the person who's got a drug problem that you're able to get them some help. It's the little ones."