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Harris reaches across bay to fill top slot

By Pam Smith

RECORDER STAFF WRITER

The career prosecutor from Alameda County who is set to assume the No. 2 job in the San Francisco district attorney's office next month is known for prosecuting gritty drug cases, expanding a diversion program for young drug dealers and reaching out to the community on his own time.

Incoming District Attorney Kamala Harris announced Monday that when she takes office Jan. 8 she'll hire Assistant DA Russell Giuntini — who currently oversees the Alameda County DA's highest-volume branch office — to fill the chief assistant district attorney's job.

Giuntini supported Harris early on in her bid to defeat two-term District Attorney Terence Hallinan. Harris spent about eight years as a prosecutor in Alameda before coming to San Francisco in 1998.

Murlene Randle, the sixth chief assistant DA under Hallinan and a 22-year veteran of the office, said Monday she isn't sure where she'll end up. "All that's still up in the air," she said after talking to Harris. Asked if she wants to keep working in the office, she repeated, "It's all still up in the air."

"I don't know [Giuntini], but I have heard nice things about him," Randle said.

Giuntini was born and raised in Oakland, graduated from San Francisco Law School in 1978 and went to work for the Alameda County district attorney. He lives in the city of Alameda.

He rose to head of the office's five-lawyer major narcotic prosecution unit in 1988 and cross-designated as an assistant U.S. attorney, prosecuting drug cases in federal court.

Alameda Chief Assistant DA Nancy O'Malley recalls when Giuntini tried members of a prison gang known as the Black Guerilla Family.

"He had that reputation of handling those types of difficult, complicated, very serious



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TRANSITION TIME: District Attorney-elect Kamala Harris named Alameda County prosecutor Russell Giuntini as her chief assistant Monday at a press conference. Harris was accompanied by supporters including Clothilde Hewlett, bottom left, and Cristina Arguedas, bottom right, as well as, from upper left, Jim Steyer, Daniel Weinstein, Sean Richards, James Brosnahan, Joseph Burton, Robert Haaland and Ted Wang.

murder cases," O'Malley said. And he's also credited with broadening a diversion program that seeks to match up nonviolent first-time drug sellers with education or job training, she noted.

"He's prosecuted the heavy narcotic dealers, and he's worked on some effective alternatives for the young, nonviolent street guys," said Alameda DA Tom Orloff.

Orloff said he'll tap someone in his office to fill Giuntini's job, but declined to say who's being considered.

Giuntini says he's been a fan of Harris' since her days in Alameda. They never worked in the same unit or on the same case, but she impressed him, he said.

When she announced she was leaving Alameda for San Francisco, Giuntini said, "I went to [DA] Tom Orloff and said, 'Would you mind if I go to Kamala and try to convince her to stay.' It's kind of ironic now she's luring me to San Francisco."

Harris cited Giuntini's experience as a career prosecutor with what she called one of the most professional prosecutor's offices in the country.

"Russ is very well known to be a great lawyer, a great manager," and cares about

affected communities, Harris said.

Giuntini has gone to community meetings on his own time since he headed the narcotics unit, to find out first-hand what constituents were concerned about, he said.

"I almost saw myself as sort of a liaison person for the criminal justice system," Giuntini said. For example, when he heard that a local grocery store's food was always stale, he alerted the DA's consumer fraud division.

"Kamala made it clear in her campaign that she wanted to work in the community," he said. "That's what made it so easy to come to her."

Giuntini and his wife, Kimberly Briggs, an assistant U.S. attorney in Oakland, each gave \$750 to Harris' campaign, the maximum individuals may contribute, according to campaign finance records. He also met with Harris early on to "kick around" policy ideas, he said.

But he doesn't have detailed plans for the office at the ready.

"I have a lot to learn about how San Francisco operates. I don't come in prejudging it," Giuntini said.

Harris said she offered him the job over

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the weekend.

Giuntini makes \$149,955 a year in his current position, Orloff said. Harris' spokesperson said the details of his new salary are still being worked out.

Hallinan's chief financial officer, Teresa Serata, said the chief assistant DA in San Francisco typically makes between \$130,468 and \$158,574, but the DA has some discretion to add to that if the No. 2 supervises people at a higher salary. Randle, who now holds the position, makes \$170,500, Serata said.

"You always expect that the DA wants to have their own No. 2, so that's definitely not a surprise to me," said Randle, who was named to the job in April.

Harris said it was too early to say whether Randle would stay on. "After the holidays we're going to sit down and



COURTESY PHOTO

CROSSING THE BRIDGE: Kamala Harris' new chief assistant, Russell Giuntini, has been with the Alameda County district attorney's office since 1979.

talk about what she'd like to do, and the needs of the administration," Harris

said.

Harris said she hasn't decided yet who will serve as the head of her homicide unit. Assistant DA James Hammer, a prominent Hallinan supporter during the recent campaign, now holds the job.

Harris repeated Monday that she doesn't intend to make decisions based on politics. "I plan on meeting with Jim [Hammer] as I do with every other lawyer in the office," to discuss preferences, qualifications and experience, Harris said.

She doesn't know if she'll lay off employees once she takes office, she said. "We're looking at a very difficult budget year, so I can't predict the future."

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