A Few Questions for . . .
Arjun Garg

In this issue, we feature Arjun Garg, FAA Chief Counsel.

A&SL: Please share a little background about yourself. Where did you grow up; where did you go to school?

AG: I grew up in Potomac, Maryland, and attended St. Albans School in Washington, D.C. I received my undergraduate degree in economics from Princeton University and my law degree from Columbia Law School.

A&SL: What influences led you toward practicing law?

AG: My mother figured out way before I did that it would be a good fit for me. She was right. The law appealed to me as a field in which to solve problems for clients who need help, think deeply about complex issues, and advocate for a position that is contested. I have gotten to do all of that, and along the way the matters I’ve handled have allowed me fascinating little peeks into all manner of interesting niches of our society—from air traffic controller training to organic food production to immigration enforcement, and many more. I love being a lawyer.

A&SL: What has been a memorable accomplishment during your legal career?

AG: In my office, I keep a framed copy of the judgment in the first case I won. Working pro bono, I represented a tenant who was sued by her landlord for over $4,000 in back rent and repairs. After counterclaiming for the landlord's housing code violations, I tried the case and won a judgment of $607 in favor of my client, the tenant. These dollar amounts were not small for her. Having started out as a defendant facing devastating liability, she walked away with an award. That case has stuck with me as a model of how much my work can mean for my clients, and for the kind of result that I aim to provide.

A&SL: You started your legal career as a law clerk to a U.S. district court judge. Why did you choose that path and what was it like to work for a federal judge?

AG: As a law student, I heard often that being a law clerk is the best job you can ever have as a lawyer. That’s held true for me so far in my career, even as I’ve been fortunate to go on to other wonderful experiences. (I note that my predecessor as FAA Chief Counsel promised me that this would be the best job I ever have—we shall see!) A law clerk gets the opportunity to develop writing and analytic skills under a jurist’s supervision, while learning various areas of the law and experiencing what makes an advocate persuasive. I benefited greatly from watching the example set by the judge for whom I clerked, and since then he has been a mentor with whom I remain close.

A&SL: You also served as a trial attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice? What kind of work did you do there?

AG: At the U.S. Department of Justice, I defended against challenges to federal government policies, programs, and decisions in civil litigation brought under the Constitution, Administrative Procedure Act, Freedom of Information Act, Title VII, and other federal statutes in courts nationwide. I worked with a wide variety of client federal agencies, including the FAA. Especially as a litigator, that job was among the best experiences one could have as preparation to go in-house at a federal agency. And it gave me an abiding appreciation for the talent and dedication of government lawyers. I greatly respect the public service that they provide.

A&SL: You were most recently the Chief Counsel of the Federal Transit Administration, one of the FAA’s sister agencies within the U.S. Department of Transportation. What led you to take the FAA Chief Counsel job?

AG: I was very happy serving at the Federal Transit Administration, but moving over to the FAA was an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up. The FAA’s stewardship of the National Airspace System is a crucial driver of the American economy and an everyday feature of American life—and also, let’s just be honest, aviation is cool. I wanted to be part of it. I knew also that I would get to continue to work with the many great colleagues I had come to know from already having been serving in the U.S. Department of Transportation.

A&SL: What are the biggest challenges for the FAA today, and what do you hope to accomplish at the FAA?

AG: The central challenge for the FAA always will be safety. That is the core of the FAA’s mission. In service to that mission, my goal is to help the United States remain the gold standard in aviation safety. That means supporting continuous safety improvement. It also means keeping to the highest standard of safety while integrating an array of oncoming,
technology-driven developments—such as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), commercial space, supersonic, and continued NextGen modernization—that keep the United States at the forefront in innovating to use air-space efficiently. The lawyers of the FAA play a vital role in supporting all of these endeavors.

A&SL: What advice would you give to a young lawyer or law student interested in pursuing an aviation-related legal career?

AG: To be a great aviation lawyer, you need to understand your aviation client’s work. That advice goes for lawyers in any field, but it’s especially true in aviation. More than other areas in which I’ve practiced, aviation is a highly technical subject in which delivering effective legal counsel for clients often depends upon having some familiarity with the technical issues and a willingness to drill down into details.

A&SL: Are there any opportunities you would highlight for young lawyers or law students looking to embark on a career in the federal government as an aviation lawyer?

AG: Law students are invited to apply for an internship with the FAA’s Office of the Chief Counsel. For new law graduates and recent law graduates completing judicial clerkships or fellowships, the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Honors Attorney Program provides a two-year opportunity to rotate through various areas of the Department, including the FAA. Veterans of the Honors Attorney Program have frequently gone on to enjoy stellar careers across the Department’s various legal offices. Details about internships and the Honors Attorney Program are available online.

A&SL: What’s your passion when you’re not at work?

AG: Outside of work, my passion is my family. I devote most of my free time to my wife and our three-year-old daughter.