Judicial Imperatives

For Dale Wainwright, '88, the road from Mt. Juliet, Tennessee to the Supreme Court of Texas was full of professional twists and turns, but Wainwright draws a straight line from the University of Chicago Law School to the bench.

"Rigorous, critical, thorough," Wainwright says. "Those were the values that the Law School brought to every aspect of the study of law. These are obligations for any lawyer, but they are absolute imperatives for a judge."

Wainwright was elected to the Texas Supreme Court last November, following his temporary appointment to the Court several months before by Texas Governor Rick Perry. Prior to that he served as Judge of the 334th District Court in Harris County. During his time on the bench, he has ruled on more than 3,000 contested cases and resolved a similar number of lawsuits involving complex and challenging issues. Well regarded in the Texas legal community for his impartiality, integrity, and work ethic, he recently received a ninety percent approval rating from bar groups in Texas.

A highly experienced litigator by the time he was appointed to his first judgeship, Wainwright says he never considered being a judge. "Some people I knew approached me and suggested I accept," Wainwright recalls. "They told me that there was much to recommend the job—except for the huge pay cut," he laughs.

Wainwright grew up in the small town of Mt. Juliet, near Nashville, Tennessee, where his mother was a high school teacher and his father a factory foreman. He attended Howard University, graduating summa cum laude in 1983. For a year after graduation, he studied at the London School of Economics. He knew that he wanted to pursue the study of law, though he did not know if he wanted to practice or teach. He applied to two law schools: Vanderbilt, which was close to where he grew up, and Chicago. "I was very interested in the interplay of law and economics," Wainwright says. "Looking back on it, there was no other place for me to be besides Chicago."

A trip to campus confirmed his feeling. The Law School was "a very dynamic and exciting environment. You could feel that right away. Contrary to popular belief, there was immediately apparent a wide diversity in philosophy and opinion among the faculty and in the outside speakers who came through the school. There was every shade of the spectrum, from very conservative to moderate to very liberal. And I think that kind of mixing of ideas and thought is very important to a good education."

At the same time, Wainwright remembers the faculty and staff as being "very approachable, very helpful, not distant or haughty. They really wanted to engage students, to hear their ideas. That's what struck me and stays with me today: the focus on the quality of the idea, the quality of the thinking. Aside from ideology, aside from who's advancing the idea—professor, student—the important thing is the idea itself, and whether it holds up."

Dean Richard Badger was very helpful during that visit, encouraging Wainwright to meet students and faculty and discussing the campus community with him. "It was not as culturally diverse as I would have liked, but there was a very active Black Law Students organization, and they encouraged me as well." Feeling at home in the community was important for Wainwright—he was married, worked part-time, and his first child was born during his time at the Law School.

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Wainwright remembers several faculty who were profoundly influential to him: David Currie, Richard Epstein, Geoffrey Stone, and Cass Sunstein. "Collectively they cultivated an environment that was inquisitive in the best sense, with a wide variety of perspectives and approaches." His fellow students contributed to this atmosphere as well. "We came from all kinds of cultural and educational backgrounds, and we helped each other get better."

Wainwright returned to Nashville after Law School, taking a position as a civil litigator at Haynes and Burns. But eventually he found himself growing restless. "When I was growing up in Mt. Juliet, Nashville seemed like such a big city," Wainwright reflects. "But after spending time in London and Chicago, I began longing for more diversity and greater cultural variety." He began looking and eventually landed at Andrews and Kurth in Houston.

His involvement with the Texas judiciary began with his appointment by then-Governor George W. Bush to the District Court. "He will make a good, conservative judge," Bush remarked at the time. "His involvement in the community combined with his legal experience is just what the people of Texas want in their judges."
Wainwright co-founded a program for inner-city youth called the Aspiring Youth Program. He served on the board of directors for the Texas Bar Association; the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program, which provides pro bono services to the indigent; the Texas Young Lawyers Association; and the Houston Young Lawyers Association. He also volunteers at the YMCA. He and his wife, Debbie, have three sons: Jeremy, Philip, and Joshua.

The Texas Supreme Court is a discretionary appellate body that hears civil matters only; the Texas Criminal Court has its own appellate system. The Supreme Court does have jurisdiction over juvenile criminal cases. Justices are elected. “That presents its own special challenges,” says Wainwright, who ran in a primary that resulted in a run-off before the general election. “It was strenuous, but I had a lot of help from a lot of people.”

In a similar vein, Wainwright says he is grateful to those who helped make it possible for him to attend the Law School, as well as those who taught and studied with him there. “I would not have been able to go to Chicago were it not for the financial aid they offered me,” he says. “So alumni and others who contribute to the Law School help keep the school strong and vital, enabling students who have talent to go forward and make some contribution to the law.

Being a graduate of the Law School gives me a sense of pride, and I have a deep sense of appreciation to the alumni, to the donors, as well as to the faculty and staff. I worked hard to get here, but it was the school and its people, the great educational environment they create, that really made it worthwhile and so valuable.”—C.A.