



Members of the Tarrant County Bar Association traveled to Austin for the formal investiture of their colleague, Debra Lehrmann, as a Texas Supreme Court Justice.

# Lehrmann Sworn in as Texas Supreme Court Justice

By Ellen Carnes

On Jan. 14, Debra H. Lehrmann was formally sworn in to the Supreme Court of Texas. The investiture ceremony, which took place in the House of Representatives Chamber of the Texas State Capitol, also included the administration of the oath of office to Justice Paul W. Green and Justice Eva M. Guzman, and a tribute to departing Justice Harriet O’Neill. Lehrmann, previously appointed by Gov. Rick Perry to fill O’Neill’s unexpired term, was elected to a full term in November’s general election.

The ceremony took place in front of a large audience, including many of Lehrmann’s friends, family, and colleagues, some of whom rented a bus to make the trip from Fort Worth. After the call to order by Supreme Court Clerk Blake Hawthorne, the Texas Department of Public Safety Region 6 Color Guard presented the colors. Sergeant Stephen Bynum and Trooper Eric Morgan, also of the Region 6 Color Guard, sang the national anthem, while Lehrmann’s sons, Gregory and Jonathan Lehrmann, led the assembled crowd in the U.S. and Texas pledges of allegiance.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Wallace B. Jefferson welcomed the guests and thanked the House of Representatives and the Senate for the use of the “beautiful, beautiful venue.” He spoke about how the Supreme Court is truly a family, saying “we stand shoulder to shoulder, justice to justice.” He introduced

Senior Justice Nathan L. Hecht. “One the wisest things I do as chief is to let another justice recognize the special guests,” Jefferson said.

Hecht acknowledged the presence of former Chief Justice Jack Pope. “All Texas judges aspire to emulate him,” Hecht said. “He began his service on the bench three years before I was born

— and I’m no spring chicken.” Among the other guests that Hecht recognized were several former Supreme Court Justices, including Chief Justice Tom Phillips, O’Neill, Priscilla Owen, Craig Enoch, Greg Abbott, Alberto Gonzales, Raul Gonzales, and Rose Specter.

Jefferson paid tribute to O’Neill. “No matter your disagreements about the law, a justice leaving is never easy — this one in particular,” he said. Elected to the Texas Supreme Court in 1998, O’Neill has been a tireless advocate for the wellbeing of abused and neglected children. In her nearly 12 years on the Court,

O’Neill wrote 211 opinions. “In this wealth of law, she is proud of plenty,” Jefferson said. Praising O’Neill’s strong scholarship and innate sense of how the Court’s decisions would play out in the real world, Jefferson also highlighted several of her more concrete contributions. “Harriet developed a detailed standard for electronic discovery,” he said. “This was a decision that marked the parameters of litigation.” In her final case, *In Re*



Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott administers the oath of office to Justice Debra Lehrmann while her family looks on.

B.W., O'Neill ruled in favor of protecting a 13-year-old child accused of prostitution. "She noted that neglected and abused children are often easily taken advantage of," Jefferson said.

Law clerks were especially fond of O'Neill. Her relationship with her staff was "a beautiful sight to behold." Although O'Neill was a pleasure to work with, her "accessible exterior sometimes obscured her incredible efficiency." Jefferson ended his remarks by thanking O'Neill for the lessons she imparted to the Court. "We will all be watching to see what lessons we can take from your life in the future," he said.

O'Neill took to the podium to thank her friends, family, and colleagues. "This is a bittersweet moment for me," she said. "On the one hand, it gives me more time to play golf. On the other, I will no longer get extra strokes on the golf course when I play with lawyers." She said that while she will miss being on the bench, the memories and friendships she made during her time on the Court will endure. O'Neill took the opportunity to champion access to justice. "Access to legal assistance can literally mean the difference between life and death," she said. "Thousands of Texans will slip over the edge — and they may not be able to return." She thanked the Court for the honor of serving, saying the "citizens of Texas are blessed with an outstanding Supreme Court."

Jean Hudson Boyd, judge of the 323rd District Court in Fort Worth, spoke about Lehrmann. "Debra and I have been friends for 27 years — since we were just baby lawyers," Hudson said. "The first time I talked to Debra [when she was opposing counsel], I immediately knew that I needed to get prepared. She had done her homework on that case." Hudson emphasized the dedication that Lehrmann has to her job. "Every person I talked to about Justice Lehrmann described her as passionate," she said. "She's interested in every legal issue and wants to hear your opinion." Lehrmann, who Hudson referred to as "the epitome of dignity and grace in the courtroom," has more than 22 years of judicial experience.

A Harris county native, Lehrmann currently calls Fort Worth home. She received both her undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Texas, where she met her husband of 27 years, Greg Lerhmann — who, according to Hudson, was called "Lucky Lerhmann" when they began dating. After practicing with Law, Snarkard & Gambill, P.C., Lehrmann was appointed to the 360th District Court in Fort Worth, where she heard many family law cases. Despite their busy schedules, Hudson said, Lehrmann and her husband were involved parents. "They were always there for their boys."

Lehrmann has received many professional accolades during her career. In 1990, she was named the Outstanding Young Lawyer of Tarrant County and in 2003, she received the Texas Bar Foundation's award for the best bar journal article of the year. Lehrmann received the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Scott Moore Award in 2005. In December of 2009, she was awarded the Judge Eva Barnes Award for dedica-

tion and outstanding service to the legal profession.

Lehrmann is a master member of the Eldon B. Mahon Inn of Court and a charter member of the Tarrant County Bar Association. She has served on the Advisory Board of Tarrant County Dispute Resolution Services, is chair-elect of the American Bar Association's Family Law Section, and is a fellow of the Texas Bar Foundation and the American Bar Foundation. In 2003, she was chosen by Gov. Rick Perry to be a Uniform Law Commissioner. Lehrmann has also written two books, *Texas Annotated Family Code* and *Court Appointed Representation of Children in Texas Family Law Cases — A Practical Guide*, both published by Lexis-Nexis.

Like her predecessor, Lehrmann is active with the Supreme Court Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth & Families. "She has devoted her career to working for the greater good for children and families in Texas," Hudson said. "When she feels strongly about something, there's no stopping her. She's a force that cannot be reckoned with."

Lehrmann's colleague from Fort Worth, State Bar Immediate Past President Roland Johnson, spoke about the incoming justice. "It's been over 50 years since a Fort Worth lawyer sat on this bench," he said, calling her "a leader in the national legal arena" and "one of the nicest people in the world." Johnson said Lehrmann will bring "years and years of wise judicial decisions," as well as "a perspective that is needed" to the bench.

Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott administered the oath of office to Lehrmann while her husband and sons stood beside her. After receiving congratulations from the other justices, Lehrmann said, "I'm overcome with a sense of humility, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of gratitude." She thanked the governor for his confidence in her and thanked her family for their support. Lehrmann recognized the other members of the Court. "I have never seen one bit of disrespect," she said. "Diversity makes this Court so rich. We don't want a Court that is just going to rubber stamp each other." Lehrmann pledged to uphold her oath every day that she sits on the bench. "This position is a great privilege, but also a great responsibility — and one that I take very seriously."

Active on the Court since June, Lehrmann has said that she will preside with a "conservative legal philosophy of strict interpretation of the laws and Constitution, as well as strong opposition to legislating from the bench." She is the eighth justice hold the seat since its creation.

Justice Paul W. Green and Justice Eva M. Guzman, who won their respective elections in November, were sworn in by Chief Justice Jefferson.

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