

A Conversation With Chief Justice Wallace B. Jefferson

INTERVIEW BY HANNAH KIDDOO



HE MAY HAVE STEPPED DOWN FROM HIS POSITION AS CHIEF JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS, but Wallace B. Jefferson has no plans to lessen his workload. During his time on the court, Jefferson took on policy issues in an unprecedented way. He views his commitment to supporting access to justice, reforming the juvenile justice system, and making the courtroom more accessible to the public via technology as accomplishments of his tenure. Of course, Jefferson's service was memorable in other ways—he also made history as the first African American chief justice in Texas.

Since Oct. 1, Jefferson has been enjoying the view from his office at Alexander Dubose Jefferson & Townsend. It's his new headquarters, and a return to his past as a civil appellate attorney. The *Texas Bar Journal* sat down with Chief Justice Jefferson to talk about life after the bench and what's next.

ON WHAT HE'S BEEN UP TO SINCE STEPPING DOWN

Well the first thing, which was the biggest thing, was announcing that I am joining Alexander Dubose Jefferson & Townsend. That was after discussions with top-notch law firms throughout the state and the country, many of which would have been potentially a very good fit. I knew I wanted to focus on civil appellate law. There's really only one firm that has the caliber of lawyers here that is purely civil appellate, and that was Alexander Dubose & Townsend. I've known many of the partners for 20 years plus and encountered their advocacy here when I was on the Supreme Court. The firm is in three cities so it gives opportunities for a lot of challenging work. The capacity to handle very complex cases exists here as well as any major firm.

I have a lot of outside interests. I work with an organization called the American Law Institute, and I'm working with [retired U.S. Supreme Court] Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. She has an initiative that is examining what's the best way to select state court judges. I'm working with the American Bar Foundation. I'm continuing a very active calendar, even before I become actively engaged in practice.

ON THAT CURRENT ACTIVITY VERSUS SERVING ON THE COURT

Well, it's different. Yes, somewhat less active. But on the court, it's a pretty regimented schedule. Every day I was either reading briefs or working with my law clerks and staff attorney and colleagues, preparing for argument. As chief justice, you are the administrator for the entire judiciary, so there are calls from all over the state about the assignment of judges, or about the need for electronic filing, or there's some media crisis. That was full time, obviously. This kind of work is different. It's busy, but it's a different kind of busy.

ON HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH MEMBERS OF THE COURT AND THEIR STAFF

A chambers is like a small family. You spend a lot of time with that group; you come to really care about each other. We're all very tight-knit. It's hard to leave them, and I miss the interaction that I had, but it was time to move on.

ON RECOGNIZING IT WAS TIME FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Now the question was, do you run again in 2014? We talked about the fact that we've got one son in college, another one who is a senior in high school and we expect to be in college next year, and an eighth-grader, and it was one of those times when the family has to make a decision. I was reasonably confident that if we left the court, our ability to provide for the family would be enhanced. The question is, do you do that for the family or not? I'd accomplished what I'd set out to accomplish at the court, and now perhaps it was time to make that decision that would be beneficial for Rhonda and our three sons. Again, she enjoyed our time on the court as well, but she agreed, 'Yeah, let's turn the page.'

ON THE SURPRISES THAT CAME WITH SERVING AS CHIEF JUSTICE

The volume of work was immense. The amount of reading—it's almost impossible to keep up, so you have to become very disciplined. The real battle among the judges about what the rule of law should be in a particular case was maybe a little bit more intense than I had imagined it would be, and I think that's a good thing. The public recognition, I understood it would happen, but not to the extent it does. People follow the court pretty closely, so lawyers know who you are and you get a lot of calls. You have to learn how to deal with journalists, advocacy groups, and citizens who are either very happy or very mad at the court for some decision that it made. You have to understand the role of the judge. I came directly from private practice, so I had to kind of learn what it meant to be a judge, how you had to handle yourself in public and private, what you could say and not say. It was quite an education. And on top of all that, you had to figure out how to campaign. Very complicated public office.

ON HIS GOALS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Being an excellent lawyer, taking on challenging cases, providing good service for my clients, remaining active in some of the issues we've discussed today, even as a private citizen. Things like access to justice and reform of our judicial system. To the extent that I can say something that is valuable, I want to be able to say it. **TBJ**