



# *Sowing the Seeds of Success*

*Roland Johnson Takes Office as President of the State Bar of Texas*

By Kevin Priestner

Glancing at Roland Johnson's résumé, one item stands out from the professional honors and distinctions one might expect from a president of the State Bar of Texas: *Swine Barn Superintendent (1998 – present)*. Spend a few minutes talking with Johnson, however, and you realize how his volunteer work at the Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show dovetails with his commitment to mentoring and community service and underscores the qualities that have made him a successful lawyer and leader.

Johnson, a shareholder in Harris, Finley & Bogle, P.C. in Fort Worth, is the descendant of hardworking Germans and Swedes. His great-grandfather, one of the Swedes, immigrated to Texas through Galveston and started farming cotton. Johnson's grandfather farmed cotton as well. Johnson's dad opted for a different take on agriculture, spending the bulk of his career as a golf course superintendent, which he referred to as his "600 acres of city farming." Johnson represents the first generation in his family not to grow up on a farm. He has fond childhood memories of picking cotton on his grandfather's farm, however, and as soon as he and his wife, Cindy, were able to, they moved to the country 20 minutes outside of town.

Despite the strong agrarian lineage in the family, Johnson was free to pursue whatever career path he chose. As the son of a Texas A&M University Aggie and a University of Texas Longhorn, he wasn't even pressured to attend one of those schools. "In our family, the belief has always been, 'Pursue what you have a passion for,'" Johnson said.

Johnson grew up in Farmers Branch, and after graduating from R.L. Turner High School, he received a scholarship from the school board association to attend Baylor University in Waco. "Ultimately, I thought I would pursue teaching, law, or seminary, so I decided I could major in anything." He selected secondary education, graduating *magna cum laude*.

There were no lawyers in Johnson's family, nor did he really know any lawyers. "Somewhere along the way I remember thinking that law would be a great career for the mind," he said. He applied to only one law school. As an undergraduate at Baylor, Johnson had served as a pre-law adviser. Baylor Law School offered him a scholarship if he would continue to serve in that capacity.

Johnson was quickly exposed to Baylor Law's proud tradition of training litigators. "The curriculum was very litigation focused and I absolutely loved it," he said. "The idea of doing trial work was something I became really passionate about. I tried hard to excel."

Johnson and a partner soon won a practice court competi-

tion, which Johnson, with typical understatement, ascribes primarily to his ability to pick a good partner.

By the time he graduated from law school, in 1979, Johnson had also married. He and Cindy met during their first year in college, when Johnson walked her home from a freshman mixer. The stars weren't quite ready to align, however, and they dated each other's friends until they were seniors. At the end of Johnson's first year of law school, they got married.

Planning their life together, the Johnsons set their sights on a new town, Fort Worth, and worked to find Roland a job while Cindy completed her master's in Social Work. (Cindy Johnson serves as executive director of Courage and Renewal — North Texas, a nonprofit that offers personal and professional renewal programs.) Decades later, Johnson is thrilled that he and his wife had the foresight and courage to organize their lives around where they *wanted* to live, rather than where they *had* to live. "I hate to see young people coming out of law school with so much debt that it determines what they can do," he said.

In 1979, when Johnson was looking for work, summer clerking was not as prominent as it is today. Johnson went to Fort Worth for a mock trial competition and one of the judges recommended that he call on the law firm of Shannon, Gracey, Ratliff & Miller, L.L.P. Johnson made a strong enough impression that he was soon work-

ing for the firm. Three years later, he moved to another Fort Worth law firm, Harris, Finley & Bogle, P.C., which had been started by a group of Shannon Gracey lawyers. Johnson has worked at Harris, Finley & Bogle ever since.

"I've never been more pleased with my decision," Johnson said. In his 27 years at the firm, only one partner has left. The mid-sized firm currently has 18 partners.

Johnson practices general civil litigation. For 19 years, he also served as managing shareholder of the firm. (He stepped down because of the time demands of serving as president-elect of the State Bar.)

"I definitely have an interest in law practice management," he said. "I like to see teams succeed. I like to figure out people's best skills, put them in a position to use them, and then get out of the way."

Johnson believes it is important for teams to work together. "I've always thought that there's enough stress outside of whatever team you're on. With advocacy work, especially, there's always someone who is trying to beat you. There's no room for the home team not to get along. There's plenty to take care of on the outside."

Johnson has earned a well-deserved reputation for manag-

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— Roland Johnson



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### Roland Johnson Takes Office



Roland Johnson picking cotton on his grandfather's farm.



Roland and Cindy Johnson on their wedding day.

ing people and allowing them to succeed, but he's equally praised by colleagues for his ability to listen and bring people who think they are adversaries together. Johnson's approach to leadership has served him well in both professional and community leadership roles.

Like many State Bar presidents, Johnson cut his teeth at the local level. "Some of the most fulfilling work I've been involved with has been on behalf of the profession," he said. "In bar work, the circles get bigger, but the issues are the same. We're helping lawyers to help their clients and give back to a broader circle — the community."

Johnson genuinely empathizes with people and likes to walk in their shoes. When he served as president of the Tarrant County Bar Association, he literally followed this advice. "Interstate 30 used to run through downtown Fort Worth and day laborers gathered beneath it," he explained. "When the federal government decided to dismantle the elevated highway, there was no plan to deal with the day labor camp." Johnson pretended to be a day laborer to get a better sense of the issues involved. "Everyone was talking about how great it was to get rid of the highway," he said. "No one was thinking of these people and their livelihoods. Ultimately, the city stepped up and helped create a good, equitable system."

Johnson said that his father, as a golf course superintendent, treated every member as his boss. When Johnson has served in leadership roles, he has adopted the same philosophy. As president of the State Bar of Texas, he intends to do the same. "The State Bar president is able to set the tone," he said.

Johnson knows that the year you have as president is not the year you planned. He anticipates that the most acute issues facing the bar during his term as president will be the need to secure additional funding for legal services to the poor and

helping lawyers through a protracted economic downturn. Aside from these issues and the inevitable unforeseen issues with which the organization must grapple, Johnson wants to highlight several initiatives targeting mentoring and professionalism.

As a young lawyer, Johnson recalls standing in awe of the partners in the firm and the lawyers he met in the courtroom. "Their professional skills were so high and their level of integrity was so high. I remember thinking, 'If I could only get on the team ...' Maybe that's why I love this work. I just want to extend to others the hands that have been extended to me."

This summer, during the Bar Leaders Conference in Houston, Johnson will unveil *Transition to Practice*, a mentoring program designed for local bar associations. He hopes bar associations across the state will consider implementing the yearlong program beginning in January 2010.

Another initiative Johnson is excited about is 3.3. To explain the name, Johnson sketches a series of boxes on a sheet of paper. One box indicates the three years students are in law school. Another box indicates lawyers' careers once they are licensed and plunge headfirst into the profession. The area between those two boxes is the three-month gap between when students take the bar examination and when they are inducted into the profession. To Johnson's mind, that three-month gap is a prime time for the State Bar to reach out to its future members and help sow the seeds of professionalism and ethics that will make these young lawyers better lawyers for their clients and their communities. Johnson is working with State Bar staff to develop an interactive, web-based module so that recent graduates can access 3.3 — and connect with other soon-to-be lawyers — no matter where they are living in the months after taking the bar exam.

"We need to become relevant to these lawyers," Johnson said.

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Johnson with his first set of golf clubs.



Roland and Cindy at home with their sons, Wes (standing in front of fence) and Ben.

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“The easiest part is getting to students,” Johnson said. “The hard part is developing a program that resonates and inspiring an ethic that sticks. Like managing a law firm, all this stuff takes time. So what? If it increases success, it’s worthwhile.”

Johnson enjoys speaking to audiences and looks forward to that part of his job as State Bar president. He also looks forward to working with the new chair of the State Bar Board of Directors, David J. Fisher of Silsbee. Johnson has served as an adjunct professor at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law, teaching law practice management and ethics. The teacher in him is especially excited about working with the State Bar Law-Related Education program.

“When you go around to national meetings, the State Bar of Texas has a tradition of excellence,” Johnson said. “Others look to us. I want to ensure that that continues to be the case.” One of the areas Johnson believes the State Bar needs to continue to be a leader is the funding and delivery of legal services to the poor. “We need to be supportive of all creative ways to ensure access to justice for Texans,” he said.

Johnson loves practicing law, but knows the importance of a well-rounded life and the benefit of taking time to reflect and recharge. “We all need to recharge,” he said. “For me, that energy comes from my family.”

The Johnsons have two sons, Wes and Ben. Just as Johnson’s parents allowed him to pursue whatever interested him, Roland and Cindy made clear to their children that they didn’t have to do what their parents had done. “We appreciate the way we

were raised and wanted to pass that along,” Johnson said.

The Johnson’s older son, Wes, followed them to Baylor, where he majored in Latin American Studies. He served in the Peace Corps in Paraguay, completed an MBA/MA in Business and International Relations at Yale, and recently started work for an energy company. Ben ventured a bit farther down I-35, to Southwestern University in Georgetown, where he majored in Environmental Studies and Spanish. This fall, he begins dual master’s degree programs in Environmental Justice and Environmental Policy and Planning at the University of Michigan.

For roughly 50 years, on the last Saturday in January, the Johnson family has convened in Fort Worth for the Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show (formerly known as the Fat Livestock Show). “Everyone in the family is invited,” Johnson said. “It connects us with our roots.” About 10 years ago, Johnson asked if he could volunteer. “Most people want to work with the high-end horses and steers,” he said. “I was offered the swine barn and couldn’t have been luckier.”

As a superintendent of the swine barn, Johnson says he mostly helps organize things. “We do everything but judge,” he said. Each year, more than 1,500 students come to the swine barn to show and sell the animals they have raised. “You meet the best people in Texas,” Johnson said. “For these students, to come to Fort Worth is a big, big deal.”

To many, serving as president of the State Bar of Texas is a big deal also. Whether you meet Roland Johnson during the State Bar Annual Meeting in Dallas, where he will be sworn in on June 26, at a local bar association meeting in your hometown, or in the swine barn in Fort Worth, he will greet you warmly and listen to what you have to say. You will part ways knowing he is passionately committed to helping young Texans and upholding the best traditions of the practice of law. ❖