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Alumni Couple Clerking for Federal Judges

March 25, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Law may be “reason, free from passion,” as Aristotle asserted. But two recent Illinois Wesleyan graduates have discovered a strong passion for the law – and for one another.

Newlyweds Erin Cox and Rachel Halfpap – both 2008 Wesleyan graduates – now serve as clerks for federal judges in the Central District of Illinois. A federal clerkship is one of the most highly sought positions for recent law school graduates. In the fiscal year 2011 (the most recent statistics available), only about 2 percent of applicants were selected for clerkships with federal judges. And to have a married couple both selected for clerkships in the same district is rarified air, indeed.

Cox is a term clerk to the Honorable Sara Darrow, who is an expert on federal criminal practice through her experience as a former Assistant U.S. Attorney in the United States District Court. “I am responsible for being intimately familiar with the facts of each case before her, conducting legal research to assist the judge’s determination of which party should prevail, and drafting a written order or opinion for the judge’s review,” Cox explained, adding that federal criminal practice is of great interest to him and he considers himself highly fortunate to learn from Judge Darrow’s experience.

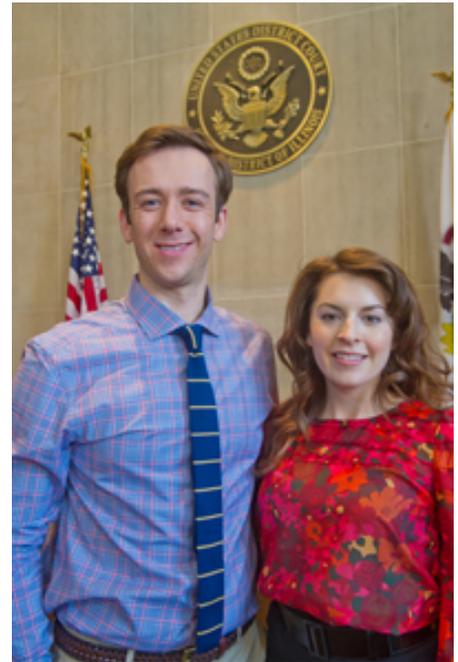
Halfpap works for the Honorable Michael Mihm, who has been on the bench for over 30 years. “He’s incredibly knowledgeable and a really great mentor,” said Halfpap, adding that she, like Cox, assists in researching and writing draft opinions. Halfpap primarily works with civil issues on Mihm’s docket, which include contractual disputes between individuals or organizations, violations of constitutional rights, employment discrimination claims, or habeas corpus petitions.

She noted Mihm handles the majority of the criminal matters on his docket. Mihm’s best-known criminal case is perhaps the trial of Ali Saleh Kahlah al-Marri, who was convicted of conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization and admitted to attending terrorist training camps prior to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Mihm sentenced al-Marri to eight and a half years in prison in 2009.

Halfpap set the precedent for a legal career. At Wesleyan she double majored in international studies and Hispanic Studies. It was Professor Robert Kearney’s Business Law class, however, where students take one real-world case, plan and execute every part of the litigation, and argue it before a judge that set Halfpap on the course to enter the University of Illinois College of Law. She received her J.D. in 2011.

Cox was also a double major – political science and Hispanic Studies – and says law school was always in the back of his mind. “You don’t choose the law as much as it chooses you,” Cox said. “I’d always been interested in issues that require you to think critically, and legal issues absolutely require that.”

“It wasn’t until I graduated that I realized [earning] a J.D. was the best way to fulfill my goals,” Cox added. He worked and traveled for a year before also entering the University of Illinois, where he completed his law degree in 2012.



Erin Cox and Rachel Halfpap

Both attorneys say critical thinking skills required in their coursework at Wesleyan were paramount to their success in law school and continue to be important in their work. “Lawyers often say that a liberal arts education enables one to think critically about legal problems, and that’s completely true,” said Cox, who calls the education and experiences he received at Wesleyan “superb.”

Those Wesleyan experiences included a semester abroad through the IWU Spain Program, where he and Halfpap met. They wed in August 2012 at Illinois Wesleyan’s Evelyn Chapel.

Halfpap says in the first year of her clerkship, Cox was still in law school. “There were cases with novel legal issues that I was really excited about but I couldn’t discuss with him because they hadn’t been made public,” said Halfpap.

When court adjourns for the day, the two admit their conversations often center around their legal cases, which both believe is a big plus. “We both think more critically about our work because we can talk to each other,” said Cox.

Both will leave their clerkships in August, when their terms are complete. They plan to move to Maine, where they both interned two summers ago. In Portland, Cox will begin another clerkship – this one for the state Supreme Court – and Halfpap will look for another position.

Long-term goals may well include public service for both of them, although the two attorneys say that verdict is not in yet. “One of the things I like best about clerking is you get to draw on many different areas of the law, and become well-versed in different aspects,” said Halfpap. “It’s very much like our time at Wesleyan.”

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