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## Living the Law

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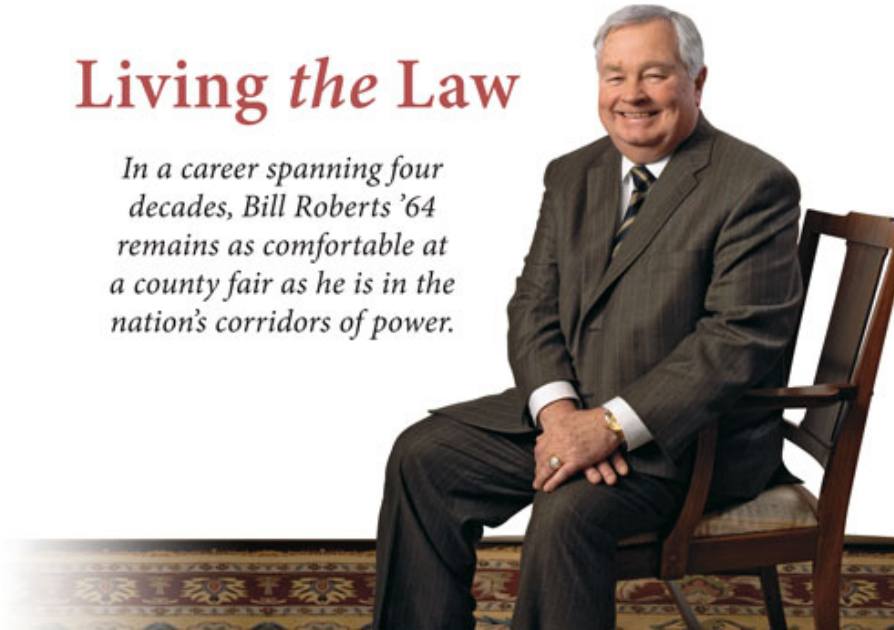
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## Living the Law

*In a career spanning four decades, Bill Roberts '64 remains as comfortable at a county fair as he is in the nation's corridors of power.*



### Story by Melissa Birks

So there was J. William (“Bill”) Roberts having cocktails with Bianca Jagger.

Former Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar still laughs about the image: Roberts, a down-home, aw-shucks type of guy who rose from humble origins to become a major player in Springfield, and Jagger, the rock star’s glamorous ex-wife-turned-social activist.

Roberts was Edgar’s chief legal counsel at the time and Jagger was with Amnesty International, campaigning for clemency for Guinevere Garcia, a 37-year-old Illinois woman sentenced to death for the 1991 fatal shooting of her husband.

“She wanted to meet with me,” Edgar recalls. “I said, ‘I don’t want to meet with her. I don’t meet with people about death penalty cases.’ Bill said, ‘Do you think I ought to?’”

“He had cocktails with her,” Edgar continues. “I think that was the highlight of his term. I got a kick out of him getting a kick out of it. Bianca Jagger, who I considered a sort of jetsetter, talking with Bill — he’s not as much of a country boy as me, but he’s pretty close.”

Edgar’s “country boy” upbringing was in Charleston, Ill.; Roberts was raised 150 miles due west in the farming town of Roodhouse. When Edgar says that Roberts is no “LaSalle Street lawyer” (a reference to the Chicago street that is home to several big legal firms), he means it as a compliment.

Technically, Roberts is a LaSalle Street lawyer — today, he’s managing partner at Hinshaw & Culbertson, a 475-attorney national law firm headquartered in Chicago. But he continues to be known throughout the state and the country by a host of power players who consider him a good friend.

Roberts has cultivated those relationships during a career that has matched his keen legal mind with his interest in politics.

“I’m over that, by the way,” he says of politics. It’s gotten too mean, too much about how to destroy the other guy, for his taste.

But he's not over being a lawyer.

“When I wake up in morning, I say, ‘This is going to be a great day.’ I enjoy my life.” It wasn't by plan, he says, but it seems that from his starting job as an assistant U.S. attorney to his current role as partner of a major law firm, “I have been involved not only as a lawyer but as a manager of lawyers, crafting plans as to where the organization will go and how we get there. I like that.”

### Keeping it real

One day in 1952, Roberts' father, who was a doctor, took him to an “Eisenhower for President” meeting in Roodhouse.

The meeting was “pretty big as I recall,” says Roberts. “I was 10 years old. It looked big to me. I remember I got a button. I remember just being fascinated by the process.”

Three years later, Roberts' father died of lung cancer. Among those in the tight-knit Roodhouse community who helped look after the teen was the family's attorney, W. O. Harp, who graduated from Illinois Wesleyan's Law School in 1926.

“He had an impact on my career,” Roberts says of Harp. “In a town of that size, people know each other. We went to the Methodist church together; his wife and my mother were pillars of the church. He was just one of several people who provided guidance.”

So politics and the law went to work shaping him.

In high school, Roberts was president of his senior class. He majored in political science at Illinois Wesleyan, where he was Student Senate vice president and captain of the track team (he now serves on IWU's Board of Trustees). While earning his law degree at Washington University, Roberts was elected president of the law school's student body and co-founded the school's Legal Aid Society.

Roberts credits two people who “gave me some breaks” in launching his legal career. Dick Eagleton hired him in 1968 as an assistant U.S. attorney, and four years later Joe Cavanagh took him on as a first assistant U.S. attorney, a position he held for seven years. Today, Eagleton is with Hinshaw & Culbertson's Peoria office — so Roberts' former boss works for him.

“I hope I treat everybody fairly and with dignity. Part of this is probably a philosophy of life,” Roberts says. “You never know who's going to be tomorrow's friend, tomorrow's ally.”

Roberts honed his political skills as Sangamon County state's attorney. He was appointed to the position in 1979, elected in 1980 and reelected in 1984. Knowing that politicians must be where the people are, Roberts participated in the first of many chili cook-offs — that grand tradition in which candidates' concoctions of meat, beans, vegetables and sometimes mysterious items are served in Styrofoam cups and judged by everyone from the county fair queen to the village mayor.



**Roberts' long career in law began with legal studies at Washington University. A photo from that era shows him elbow-deep in law texts.**

“I shook hands with everybody,” Roberts says of that first cook-off. “Man of the people. Cookin’ chili. Drinkin’ beer. It doesn’t get any better.”

But, in fact, it did get better. While Roberts loved being Sangamon County’s prosecutor, he counts being appointed U.S. attorney for the Central District of Illinois as a career highlight. Nominated by President Ronald Reagan and unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate, Roberts served as chief federal prosecutor for the 46-county district from 1986 to 1993.

He enjoyed the ability to throw his office into long-running projects aimed at curtailing certain types of crimes. Illegal gun trafficking was high on his list. “We had some pretty heavy-duty tools to take out people who were violent criminals. ... I think we made an impact, I do.”

Describing those who cheat welfare and other social programs as people who “steal from our [country’s] generosity,” Roberts also worked to ensure that such funds went to where they were intended.

Another highlight of his tenure as a U.S. attorney was building a strong team of assistants — many of whom have gone on to their own high-profile careers.

He crafted a position for one assistant, Rodger Heaton, to oversee the office’s appellate work. In 2006, Heaton became U.S. attorney for the Central District of Illinois, following the footsteps of his old boss.

“I enjoyed working for him,” Heaton says of Roberts. “He had a personal interest in the quality of the appellate work. It is the highest court that most people ever practice in — pretty much the last stop on the judicial circuit. It’s important work.”

Heaton especially admired his boss’s ability to “relate to anyone,” from top government attorneys to “any person he meets on the street.”

John Schmidt recalls joining Roberts’ team, just out of law school, “green as green can be,” in 1990. Schmidt now holds another of Roberts’ former jobs: Sangamon County state’s attorney. He describes Roberts as a “prosecutor’s prosecutor” who taught him how to use discretion “for the most good and to ensure that justice is done.”

“I learned that there,” says Schmidt. “I kept it all my life. ... You get Bill Roberts, that’s who he is. A kid from Greene County, Illinois. Very bright, just a great lawyer. I don’t think it’s an act. He’s sincere. That’s what makes him so good. He doesn’t have to put on airs.”

That’s something Roberts learned from mentors who warned him to never try coming off as fake in front of a jury.

“Somebody once described my closing-argument style as not unlike one giving directions to a lost motorist,” Roberts says. He chuckles and lightly shrugs his shoulders. “That’s the way I am. It’s worked.”

## A law-and-order guy



Roberts' personal style makes him a comfortable fit at the county fair, in the courtroom — or even in the corridors of the U.S. Justice Department in Washington, D.C. That's where Roberts could often be found from 1991 to 1993, when he chaired the attorney general's Advisory Committee of U.S. Attorneys. It was an especially busy time for Roberts, who continued to serve as U.S. attorney for Illinois' Central District. It was also a vital time for the committee, as newly appointed U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr relied on Roberts and his colleagues to advise him on several historic cases.

Roberts was there in April 1992 when a Miami jury found Panamanian dictator Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega guilty of federal drug-trafficking, racketeering and money-laundering charges.

**Roberts and then-attorney general William Barr (above right) confer in Barr's Washington, D.C., office in 1992.**

He also led the advisory committee in its review of the Rodney King case, after three white Los Angeles

police officers were acquitted of excessive force in beating King, a black motorist, in a traffic stop. The acquittal sparked riots; in its aftermath, the Justice Department charged the officers with civil rights violations. A year later, a federal jury found two of the officers guilty and acquitted two others.

Roberts had an additional hat to wear when, in October 1992, Barr appointed him to lead a Justice Department task force investigating criminal conduct related to \$5.5 billion in loans made by the Atlanta branch of an Italian bank to Iraq prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

A typical day during his stint in Washington started with a meeting in the attorney general's conference room with senior staff. As in church, Roberts jokes, each participant claimed the same seat every day. U.S. Solicitor General Ken Starr sat on his right and Bob Mueller, chief of the criminal division (and later head of the FBI) was on his left. But it was meeting a sitting president, George H.W. Bush, that really left Roberts with stars in his eyes.

As Roberts told *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine* in 1993, Bush showed up for one meeting in shirtsleeves, apologizing for being late. "I've been on the phone with [Russian president] Boris Yeltsin," Bush explained, "and boy, is that guy a talker."

At that point, Roberts said, "I had to pinch myself."

When President Bill Clinton took office in 1993 and fired nearly all of his predecessor's U.S. attorneys, Roberts returned to Illinois and ventured into private practice. Then Edgar called.

By 1995, the governor and Roberts had known each other for about 10 years. Edgar says he knew that Roberts could hold his own in Springfield and Roberts did just that, respected by Republicans and Democrats alike, says Edgar, adding, "He's down-to-earth. We all have egos, ambition. I think he has that under control."

Roberts found the position of chief legal counsel intriguing, filling a gap in his government experience that included work at the county and federal levels, but not the state level. And, he says, "I have the highest regard for Jim Edgar. He's a friend."

Roberts describes the state job as reminiscent of a drill called “bull in the ring” that he endured while playing football in high school.

“One guy’s in the middle, there are six to eight guys on the side, and so the coach says, ‘One! Seven! Four!’ and you had to fend off these guys as they’re coming,” Roberts says, his arms waving to demonstrate. “It just seemed to me that situations and problems were coming a lot faster.”

The Guinevere Garcia case was one such situation. Bianca Jagger was among death-penalty opponents arguing that Garcia had a long history of abuse that included alcoholism and sexual molestation, and that her execution would be inhumane in light of her harrowing past.

On Jan. 16, 1996 — just 14 hours before she would have become the second woman in 20 years to be executed in the U.S. — Edgar commuted Garcia’s sentence to life in prison with no chance of parole.

“We spent a lot of time back and forth,” Edgar recalls. “I’d say, ‘This doesn’t seem like a death penalty case.’ [Roberts] pretty much agreed. He’s a law-and-order guy. That gave me comfort, working together, that my instinct was not off base.”

Roberts doesn’t mention the Garcia case while talking about working for Edgar, but he does recall prosecuting death-penalty cases in Sangamon County and as a U.S. attorney.

“My agreement with voters was that if I think the case is sufficiently serious for the death penalty, I would ask for it and let the trial decide.”

One high-profile case involved the so-called “Good Samaritan” slaying of Mimi Covert in 1985. In a snowstorm, Covert stopped to help a stranded motorist on a highway north of Springfield. The motorist turned out to be DeWayne Britz, a recently released prison inmate. Britz was later tried for abducting, raping and murdering Covert after he confessed to police and even led them to her body.

Roberts convinced the jury to give the death penalty.

“Death-penalty cases are no fun to try. It’s not enjoyable to stand in a courtroom and explain to 12 people how they should condemn this guy 12 feet from you,” Roberts says. “[I argued] if there is to be a death penalty, this is a guy who deserves it and I was passionate in seeking it. Yet it’s not the kind of thing that with success — and we were successful — you go home and go ‘Whoopee.’ You go home and get a drink.”

Britz’s death sentence, along with more than 100 others, was commuted to life in prison when Gov. George Ryan — in one of his last acts as governor — emptied Illinois’ death row in early 2003.

Roberts uses a deft touch when expressing his frustration about this outcome. He clearly believes the death penalty was a just punishment for Britz and other defendants who received the sentence during his tenure. He wrote his opposition to clemency in a letter to Ryan — whom, Roberts says in the same breath, he considers a friend.



**Roberts and Gov. Jim Edgar (left) worked together on a variety of issues during Roberts’ time as Edgar’s chief legal counsel.**

**His phone is still ringing**

During his time at the governor's office, Roberts kept in touch with a colleague at Hinshaw & Culbertson, firm chairman Donald Mrozek. They'd have breakfast, Mrozek filling Roberts in on the goings-on at the firm and Roberts offering advice. Mrozek, Roberts declared, was spread too thin. He needed something like a first assistant. "Little did I know in our discussions that I was sort of designing my next job," Roberts says.

In 1997, a year before Edgar's term ended, Roberts returned to Hinshaw & Culbertson. He now divides his time between Springfield and Chicago. A large portion of his time, he says, is spent managing other lawyers and "being part of the process that steers the ship," such as helping coordinate the firm's strategic plan for upcoming years.

The second part of his job involves white-collar defense, including defending many of those caught up in the federal investigation of former Illinois Gov. George Ryan. Ryan was convicted in 2006 of 18 felony charges stemming from his tenure as Secretary of State and as governor. In all, 79 state workers, business leaders and others have been charged in the sweeping federal corruption investigation.

"Part of, I guess, the craft of my kind of practice is trying to keep those who are witnesses in the category of witness and not as subject or target of investigation."

How does he do that? Roberts' answer is characteristically low-key but to the point.

"Carefully," he says.

These days, Roberts' phone rings constantly with requests to tap into the wisdom that comes from his vast and varied resume of experiences.

Edgar sought out Roberts when making one of his most difficult decisions: whether or not to make another run for governor in 2005. "He was one of the people I got advice from," says Edgar, "which underscores the high esteem I have for him." Edgar won't divulge any specific advice but does say that Roberts pointed out potential conflicts that might arise because of Edgar's service on various boards and his interests in such things as race horses. "He didn't say 'Don't run' or 'Run.' It was, 'If you run, how are you going to respond to this?'"

In the end, Edgar announced that he would not run.

Roberts, meanwhile, remains busy in both his professional and private life. For instance, he and his wife, Carole, are involved in the Animal Protective League in Springfield, which operates a no-kill shelter and spay/neuter clinic. They are the proud humans to adopted pets, Boo the dog and Max the cat.



**When Roberts visits the State Capitol in Springfield, he's greeted like a celebrity.**

In June 2006, Roberts received the Illinois State Bar Association's Board of Governors Award for significant service to the legal profession and the public. Last year he was chosen as the best business lawyer in downstate Illinois by *Leading Lawyers Network Magazine*. He enjoys receiving such accolades, but is far from ready to

rest on his laurels — any more than he can resist trying to whip up a new variation of the chili recipes he's been perfecting for years.

“Like so many things,” he says, “the older we get, the better we get.”