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The Law of Attraction

Before securing highly sought federal clerkships in the same Illinois district, classmates Rachel Halfpap and Erin Cox took their vows as husband and wife.

Story by KIM HILL



Law may be “reason, free from passion,” as Aristotle asserted. But two Class of 2008 alumni have discovered a strong passion for the law — and for one another.

Erin Cox and Rachel Halfpap — who were married Aug. 11, 2012, in Wesleyan’s Evelyn Chapel — are 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 particularly out of the ordinary.

Cox is a term clerk for U.S. District Judge Sara Darrow. “I am responsible for being intimately familiar with the facts of each case before (Darrow), 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 says. As a former assistant U.S. attorney, Darrow is regarded as an expert on federal criminal practice — an area that holds special interest for Cox.

Halfpap works for U.S. District Judge Michael Mihm, who has been on the bench for more than 30 years. “He’s incredibly knowledgeable and a really great mentor,” says Halfpap, adding that she, like Cox, assists in researching and writing draft opinions. She 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 prior to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Mihm sentenced al-Marri to eight-and-a-half years in prison in 2009.

For her part, Halfpap traces her interest in law back to Illinois Wesleyan, where she double majored in international studies and Hispanic Studies. One class that made an especially large impact was a business

law course taught by Robert Kearney, who himself clerked for the U.S. Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals prior to joining the faculty. In Kearney's class, students focus on a single 'real-world' case, plan and execute every part of the litigation and argue it in the McLean County Law and Justice Center before a working judge, which for the past several years has been Elizabeth Robb '78, chief justice of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit. The experience 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," he observes. "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 adds. He worked and traveled for a year before also entering the University of Illinois, where he completed his law degree in 2012.

Both attorneys say critical thinking skills required in their coursework at Wesleyan were paramount to their success in law school and continue to be vital in their legal work. "Lawyers often say that a liberal arts education enables one to think critically about legal problems, and that's completely true," says 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.

Halfpap notes that 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," says Halfpap.

These days, when court adjourns, the two admit their after-work conversations often center around their legal cases, which they regard as a big plus. "We both think more critically about our work," says Cox, "because we can talk to each other."

After their terms as clerks are completed this August, the couple 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 clerk for a federal district court judge.

Long-term goals may include public service, although the two attorneys say that verdict is not in yet. Says Halfpap, "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. It's very much like our time at Illinois Wesleyan."