

A Tribute to Harry Reasoner

By Barrett H. Reasoner

When the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society Journal asked me to do a tribute to my father, my thoughts immediately turned to his still-developing legacy. Harry Reasoner continues to have a tremendous impact on his chosen profession, but nonetheless my focus will look back from a personal perspective on what his career and approach to life have meant to me and my sister, Macey Reasoner Stokes. Macey and I were in a fairly unique position when we decided to go into the practice of law. Not many young lawyers go into the legal business with a parent who is a legal “giant” in the same city and area of practice. This undoubtedly gave us the advantage of being able to meet many prominent people in the profession easily. When people have a positive impression of your parents, they are often welcoming and start out with a favorable impression of you. Along with this benefit, however, comes the downside of worrying about whether people will judge you on your own merits or instead view your achievements as having come only through having a famous father.



Harry Reasoner.

Fortunately for Macey and me, our father is not just a singularly focused legal giant. Harry Reasoner is a loving man who cares first and foremost about his family, followed by his many friends and our society as a whole. Though we certainly need more of it in the world, this approach to life is not what makes him unique. Instead, what sets him apart for me and Macey is the way his approach to life and the law prepared us so well to succeed in and enjoy this profession.

The first unmistakable aspect of his approach is our father’s deep respect for his profession and the critical role it plays in our society. He has always spoken with reverence about some of the lawyers who shaped our profession, including Judge Charles Clark of the Second Circuit, a great reformer of federal civil procedure whom he clerked for; Justice Thurgood Marshall,



Harry, age eight, fourth grade.



Harry at UT Law School,
Class of '62.



Harry's future wife
Macey Hodges,
UT Law School Student.

whom he worked for at the end of his clerkship after Judge Clark passed away; Professor Gus Hodges, his father-in-law, who was one of the pioneers in developing Texas civil procedure; UT Law Professor Charles Alan Wright, who was a beloved teacher and friend; and his mentors at Vinson & Elkins like David Searls, the great trial lawyer. The contributions of these people to his career and to the profession have always been of paramount importance to him.

Our father's respect for the legal profession is also reflected in other ways. He has always been active in organizations like the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society and the U.S. Supreme Court Historical Society, which preserve and celebrate our legal history. He has also diligently served organizations that strengthen the present-day practice, like the Antitrust Section of the ABA, which he chaired during a time when antitrust litigation was much more prevalent than it is today.

Coupled with this respect for the profession, however, has been an equally important sense of irreverence. Whether the subject was law, politics, or history, our dad has always enjoyed debunking positions that were presented in an arrogant way. He is always ready with the factual or legal needle to prick the balloon created by a blowhard's argument. Young lawyers often run into older lawyers who try to intimidate or bully them with positions that are, to put it gently, not completely accurate or fully researched. While Macey and I were not immune from the usual anxieties, it helped us to know that the person trying to intimidate us was but a pin prick away from having his or her argument exposed for what it was. Dad has also always preached that preparation and enjoying what you do—as opposed to some mysterious magic that only comes with experience—are the keys to success.

Another essential ingredient to our father's approach is recognizing how critical it is for our profession to provide legal services for those who cannot afford them. I can vividly remember as a child attending a hearing in which he was arguing on behalf of Texas Department of Corrections



(Upper left): Harry and Barrett, mock trial at UT Law, Spring 1990;
(upper right): Family photo with (left to right) Susan Reasoner (Barrett's wife),
Harry, Mrs. Harry Reasoner, Macey Reasoner Stokes, and Barrett Reasoner;
(bottom): Harry and Macey, Susan and Barrett, HBA harvest party.

prisoners that they should have the right to receive confidential mail from their counsel without review by the guards. From our youthful perspective, there was nothing unusual to Macey and me about this: it was just what lawyers did. Dad has always talked about how providing pro bono service is essential to what makes the law a profession as opposed to just a business. I have prioritized this in my practice, and Dad continues to model this today. He currently serves as Chair of the Texas Equal Access to Justice Commission.

The last essential element of a successful law practice that we learned from our father is having a sense of humor. Anyone who ever had the pleasure of watching our dad, his dear friend Joe Jamail, and other friends trade stories over drinks knows what I am talking about. If there is a funnier or more entertaining way to pass the time, I am not aware of it. There is typically some poor vanquished sap on the losing end of the story, but denigrating that

person is never the point. Such exchanges are really all about the wonderful esprit de corps and excitement that can come from this profession—and remembering that if you are doing



Having fun, 1988.

it right, a lot of funny things happen in the practice of law. Dad has always said that this would be “a hard way to make a living” if you do not enjoy those moments.

They say that attitude is everything in life. That adage applies very well to the practice of law. Our father has done incredible things for Macey and me personally and for the profession. Happily, he is not finished giving in either case. But for Macey and me, teaching us how to approach this profession in a way that leads to success and, most importantly, enjoyment is among his most important and lasting gifts.



Harry and Macey in Central Park during a family trip in November 2015.



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