

Introducing the Newest Supreme Court Justices: Chatting with Justice Jay B. McCallum

Interviewed by C.A. (Hap) Martin III



Louisiana Supreme Court Justice Jay Bowen McCallum. Photo provided by the Louisiana Supreme Court.

Justice Jay Bowen McCallum took his seat on the Louisiana Supreme Court bench on Nov. 13, 2020. A lifelong resident of Union Parish, Justice McCallum was born and raised near Bernice, La., in the Pisgah Baptist Church community, which as he said “shaped much of his life.” He was the first person in his family to obtain a college education and, after graduating from Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center in 1985, he started his law career in Union Parish.

Subsequently, he served for 11 years in the Louisiana Legislature. He was elected as judge for the 3rd Judicial District, serving Union and Lincoln parishes, and served in that capacity for 15 years. In 2018, he was elected, without opposition, to the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeal. He was then elected to represent District Four of the Louisiana Supreme Court, the largest geographic district of the Louisiana Supreme Court, serving the largest number of parishes in the state.

Justice McCallum and his wife, Deanna Dunham McCallum, also an attorney, have two children, a son and a daughter, and one grandson.

Martin: From your biography on the Louisiana Supreme Court website, from which I stole a lot of information, it indicated that you were the first person in your family to go to college.

McCallum: I was the first person in my family to get a college education, much less go to law school.

Martin: Well, that was going to be my next question. What got you to go beyond college to law school?

McCallum: I grew up working in the hayfield and my grandfather was not a very well-educated man. He had to drop out of school at the fourth grade because both his parents had died early in the Depression. He had seen lawyers on TV, I suppose, and he just thought that sounded like a good way to make a living and not have to work out in the hayfield and having an air conditioner. That piqued my interest and again he couldn't tell me exactly what he

thought a lawyer did but he thought it was a commendable profession. He had great respect for the profession of law and I think the public in general back then did and so he thought that would be a respectable career to follow. That got me interested and the more I found out about it the more I thought, that is something I want to do. Again, with my background, I thought it was a herculean task to undertake and to be able to do it.

Martin: Did you like law school?

McCallum: I did. I loved law school. I enjoyed college as well as law school, but I think a lot of that had to do with growing up working. I didn't have to work in a hayfield in college or law school so I thought it was great. It sure was a lot easier than putting shingles on a roof in August. I worked my way through college, and then clerkships and all when I was in law school. But again, that was better than what I had grown up doing.

Martin: Now, you went first into private practice?

McCallum: I did.

Martin: And later your wife became a lawyer as well?

McCallum: That is correct.

Martin: And she joined you in your practice?

McCallum: I had been practicing law for about three years when my wife asked me what I thought about her going to law school. I said, if that's what you want to do, then that's what you need to do. I don't want to be the one to keep you from that, so I will support you. She got her law degree and has a private practice now and also works as an assistant district attorney for the 3rd Judicial District Court.

Martin: I've got to ask, does being a Justice on the Supreme Court help you win any more arguments at home now?

McCallum: I don't win any more at home. I will tell you that if your wife is an assistant district attorney that trumps being a Justice on the Supreme Court.

Martin: What made you want to be a judge?

McCallum: It has been an interesting progression in my life. I have found that, even without great long-term planning, God has opened doors for me to step through where I didn't even realize doors existed. I didn't know I was going to run for state representative until a month before qualifying opened up for that job. The Legislature under Governor Roemer that year had done reapportionment in a special session and didn't complete its work until the end of June. We looked at the new district they had drawn for Union Parish and it looked like something we could have a valid chance of winning. So we did that and won. There was a third seat created on the 3rd Judicial District Court after I had been in the Legislature for 11 years and it did not appear that was going to happen. But then it did in kind of a sudden way, so I ran for that seat. The 2nd Circuit and Supreme Court, in succession, were just as much things that happened without much long-term planning. You can't plan on a judge or a justice retiring, which is exactly what happened on the 2nd Circuit and the Supreme Court, so it opened up those seats and the opportunities were there.

Martin: Was there anybody in particular that you looked to as a mentor with your judicial career?

McCallum: James Dozier was a judge on the 3rd Judicial District Court for a number of years. He and I were close and he was a great source of information and inspiration to me and helped me out in a lot of areas in my life. Theologically, he was a great help to me in my Christian beliefs, but also obviously as far as the role and function of being a judge and how to perform that office with dignity and with professionalism. Judge Dozier had a great respect for the law and had a great respect for the judiciary. It was important to him that we conduct matters in a dignified and professional type of way and he really impressed that upon me. He helped with the wording and how I would say things in court when I received a jury verdict.

Think about what's going on when you have a jury return a verdict. That's a really significant event in the lives of the people who are parties to that suit and a lot of times even beyond the people who are in the courtroom. You want to make sure that what you do gives the impression that things are being handled professionally and are being handled correctly. How you approach your job of being a judge helps send that signal. We are communicating as we go about doing our jobs as judges and we need to remember that the public is reading us. They are looking at us and the communication is not just verbal. It's also nonverbal. We need to uphold the dignity and respect that people have for our judicial system. It's critically important that we continue to be able to resolve our disputes in the courtroom rather than outside. Judge Dozier was instrumental in helping me understand that how we do our job and how we are perceived in doing our job is really important in maintaining the public's confidence and trust in the judicial system.

Martin: Now, you've been on the bench with the Supreme Court for a short time.

McCallum: That's correct. I took my oath of office and began Nov. 13, which was a Friday the 13th. I'm glad I'm not superstitious.

Martin: Has there been anything since you've been on the bench that surprised you?

McCallum: Yes, and I don't have to hesitate to answer that question. The number of disciplinary problems we are having to deal with, both in the legal profession, but also in the judiciary. I did not realize the volume of issues that we had in the state until I got on the Supreme Court.

Martin: Outside of the legal world, do you have any particular interests?

McCallum: My wife and I have two children. My son John has graduated from college and has a career in research and development for a company that develops video games. My daughter is a sophomore at LSU. So until they left the house, my hobbies and extracurricular activities revolved around them. Whatever they were interested in was a matter of great importance to me and my wife, so that's what we did. I like to hunt, but mainly I get to turkey hunt now more than anything else. I like to garden, but I don't vegetable garden so much as I garden for wild life — butterfly garden, for the birds and that sort of thing. I enjoy that a lot.

Martin: One of the things that I always noticed, when I practiced in front of you, was that you were a pretty dapper dresser. One thing in particular was that you usually wear a bowtie. How did that come to be?

McCallum: I'm that first person in my family, as I mentioned, to ever go to college, much less law school. The McCallums were not a very prolific bunch; there weren't many of us in

Union Parish or anywhere else. I told my wife when we got ready to come back to Farmerville to start practicing law, I said, you know, nobody knows who I am. They're not going to know my name, but they may remember that guy who wears a bowtie. So I started wearing a bowtie because it was a marketing device. I decided that if I was going to wear a bowtie, I didn't want a clip-on. I wanted to tie my own. So I went to the trouble of learning how to do that. Now, if I ever wear a straight tie, people get on me and demand that I go back to the other, so that's about all I own anymore. The other thing is, it does have the practical aspect of not getting in your soup or flying around so much. So that's always beneficial.

Martin: I appreciate the time that you've spent with us and good luck.

McCallum: Oh, my goodness, I enjoyed it! I appreciate your interest. Thank you for asking.

C.A. (Hap) Martin III is a member in the Monroe law firm of Shotwell, Brown & Sperry, APLC. He served as the Seventh District representative on the Louisiana State Bar Association's (LSBA) Board of Governors from 2015-18. He currently serves on the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program Board and the Louisiana Bar Journal's Editorial Board. He will be sworn in as the next LSBA secretary and Journal editor in June 2021. (camiii@centurytel.net; 1101 Royal Ave., Monroe, LA 71201)



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