

Portraits & Perspectives: Judges of the U. S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana



The Honorable Darrel James Papillion. Photo courtesy of Papillion family.

Interviewed by Valerie T. Schexnayder

Darrel J. Papillion was nominated by President Joseph Biden in March 2023 for a position on the bench of the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Louisiana. Following his confirmation in the U.S. Senate on May 30, he received his judicial commission on June 1. His investiture ceremony was conducted in September.

Papillion was a partner in the Baton Rouge firm of Walters, Papillion, Thomas, Cullens, LLC. He received his undergraduate and law degrees from Louisiana State University. He served as a judicial clerk in 1994 and 1995 for Hon. Catherine D. Kimball, associate justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, who would later become Louisiana's first female Chief Justice. He is a former president of the Louisiana State Bar Association and the Baton Rouge Bar Association.

Schexnayder: Good afternoon, Your Honor.

Judge Papillion: Good afternoon, Valerie.

Schexnayder: First and foremost, congratulations on your recent appointment as district judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana. That's an awesome accomplishment.

Judge Papillion: Thank you.

Schexnayder: What first sparked your interest in the law?

Judge Papillion: Well, after it became clear that maybe being a cowboy or fireman might not be the ideal career for me, I settled upon the idea of being a lawyer. I decided maybe I should consider being a lawyer when I was in the eighth grade. I became interested in being a lawyer from

watching my dad, who was not a lawyer, but was a person who was very approachable and was liked by a lot of people. He was someone people came to for advice. And, maybe someone joked that he was their lawyer or their counselor. And, I was just very interested in government and things of that nature. So, I thought the law might be a good career for me to help people.

Schexnayder: I remember that you once referred to your dad as one of the smartest people you ever knew, and you just mentioned earlier about your dad giving advice to others. What is the best advice your father ever gave you?

Judge Papillion: My dad gave me lots of advice, but the best advice he gave me was to try to do my best at everything and to be honest and compassionate and helpful to other people.

Schexnayder: Who served as your inspiration or your role model in your journey to becoming a lawyer?

Judge Papillion: I've been really blessed to have many role models. When I was in eighth grade, a lawyer named Jacque Pucheu from my hometown of Eunice came and spoke to my class on career day at my request. I looked up to him as a kid growing up in Eunice. My father was really good friends with Jack Burson, who was also a lawyer in Eunice, and Morgan Goudeau III, who was the district attorney in Opelousas, the parish seat. When I was in high school and college, I got to work with Mr. Goudeau and Mr. Burson. And, after that, my role models were Justice Catherine Kimball, for whom I clerked at the Louisiana Supreme Court after law school at LSU, Woody Norwood at McGlinchey, and Ed Walters, of course, for many years in Baton Rouge.

Schexnayder: You mentioned that at first you wanted to be a cowboy when you grew up. Did you grow up in a rural area?

Judge Papillion: I grew up in the middle of nowhere, but it was really quite a special somewhere. I grew up in a little community called Swords, Louisiana, which is halfway between the metropolitan areas of Eunice and Opelousas in

rural St. Landry Parish. My grandparents and great-grandparents and ancestors long before that had been farmers in that area, and we raised cattle. As a little boy, I really thought I would like very much to be a cowboy.

Schexnayder: <laugh> How did your upbringing in the small rural town prepare you for a legal career, prepare you for the state bar presidency and now for a federal judgeship?

Judge Papillion: Well, I believe that one of the great advantages of growing up in a small community, not to diminish all the benefits that come from growing up in a larger community, but growing up in a small community, I learned I would run into the same people over and over again. And so the way one carries oneself or the way one works on their reputation is very important because, people will know you and figure you out very quickly. So, I believe the small-town environment and the way people cooperated with one another really helped my approach to lawyering. For example, when I was a student, I worked summers in Mr. Jack Burson's law office in Eunice, and I would do legal research for him. That is when I learned that no lawyer in Eunice owned a complete law library.

Mr. Burson had the Supreme Court Reporter, actually Lawyer's Edition, and another law firm had, in those days, the Federal Second books. Someone else had the Southern Reporter, and they would, within just a couple of blocks of one another, would go into each other's law libraries and borrow one another's books so they could write their briefs. In actuality, everyone had a complete law library in that way. They just didn't have all the books in one room. In those days, people, of course, could use the law library at the parish courthouse, and that was a complete law library. This was before computer research. The way these lawyers, who would oftentimes be opposed to one another, were literally writing opposing briefs out of each other's law books sort of taught me that one's opponent in litigation doesn't have to be an enemy or someone not to see as a fellow human.

Schexnayder: So, your early days clerking in Eunice gave you your first lessons in professionalism.

Judge Papillion: Yes. The way they did things in a small town helped me when I came to the big city of New Orleans as a lawyer, fresh out of school, to really have my own way of dealing with my opponents or my peers.

Schexnayder: How would you describe your practice between the time you graduated from law school after your clerkship with Justice Kimball until your appointment as a federal judge?

Judge Papillion: It's interesting in that I feel like I've come full circle. After clerking at the state Supreme Court for a year, I went to work for McGlinchey Stafford, but I worked in a specialized part of the firm that did products liability work. I did a lot of automobile, heavy equipment, marine, and asbestos product defense. And that is how I got to meet you. I did a tremendous amount of work in those days in federal court, especially in the Eastern District. And after several years of doing defense work, I got an opportunity to become a plaintiff lawyer. I moved to Baton Rouge in 1999, where I would work for the next 24 years doing mostly plaintiff work. But in my last five years or so, I began doing a lot more defense work, and in my last 10 years as a lawyer, I did some mediation work, but, overall, my practice was very heavily concentrated on plaintiff personal injury and wrongful death work.

Schexnayder: During your years of practice, what cases or types of cases gave you the most personal satisfaction?

Judge Papillion: It's a difficult thing to say because they often arose out of great tragedy, but the most fulfilling cases were cases in which I represented people who, until hiring me, had never hired a lawyer or needed a lawyer, and their first encounter with a lawyer was when they retained a lawyer because of some great tragedy. I got a lot of pride and satisfaction representing people who were really badly injured, often in work-related accidents in petrochemical plants.

Schexnayder: In addition to your very busy law practice, you also served the LSBA as president several years ago. How did you begin your service in the Bar Association?

Judge Papillion: I believe it is multifaceted, but on one hand, I was interested in meeting people and being more active in the profession and trying to give something back. But on the other hand, I was blessed to have the tremendous support and guidance of my firm's senior partner, Ed Walters, who was very active in state, local and specialty bar activities. He allowed me to pursue bar service and bar leadership and to get almost as much credit for that within the firm as I did for time spent working on cases. In most law firms, people often contribute to the bar in their spare time or at their own personal expense, but I had the great fortune of having a firm that allowed me to use parts of the workday and that was eager to support my bar work financially by allowing me to use firm resources to attend conferences or do work that was helpful to various bar activities.

Schexnayder: During your service as the bar president, what were your most memorable moments, your highlights and your accomplishments?

Judge Papillion: I had the challenge early in my presidency of dealing with the August 2016 floods in south Louisiana. I had a great opportunity to travel throughout the state and meet lawyers and judges and law students from all corners of the state to advance the initiatives of the LSBA. Very late in my bar presidency, my first wife Shirley became sick. And, initially we were hopeful everything would work out with her illness, but, unfortunately, I spent the last couple of months of my bar presidency, obviously, very concerned about the health of my wife and our family.

Schexnayder: Based on the newspaper articles reporting on your nomination, I understand that your nomination was historic because you had bipartisan support for your nomination. I even noted that opposing counsel in some of your

cases even wrote letters in support of your nomination. This is a remarkable feat. How did you accomplish that?

Judge Papillion: That was all really gratifying. I am still at a loss to explain all the support I received, but I believe that after 29 years of trying to work hard and be fair and do good work, my peers rewarded me with their support, which led both Republicans and Democrats to advocate for my nomination and confirmation. And I hope to spend many years trying to live up to the nice things people said about me in letters or in the newspapers during the confirmation process.

Schexnayder: What words of wisdom would you give to younger lawyers today about professionalism, reputation and service to the profession?

Judge Papillion: I would tell young lawyers that it takes a lifetime to build a reputation, but only a moment to lose it. I would tell young lawyers they should treat no case as if it is their last case in terms of how they deal with their opponents or the court. Integrity and being truthful and honest and fair is of tremendous importance. I would tell them that lawyers who fight just for the sake of fighting or disagree for the sake of appearing "tough," or tough to deal with, are usually not as successful as lawyers who are known to be fair and who have their cases well prepared for trial. My advice would be to work hard, be honest, and always try to do the right thing.

Schexnayder: Those are great words of advice for young lawyers. Do you have time for any hobbies?

Judge Papillion: I love LSU and Saints football and all LSU sports. I try to read as much as I can. I am usually reading three or four books at the same time. And I also love to cook and spend time with my large family and with my friends.

Schexnayder: You just indicated you like to cook for your large family. Tell me a little bit more about your family.

Judge Papillion: Well, I have a blended family of five children. I remarried after my first wife died. My

lovely wife Lauren is a lawyer, and we had a child of our own, in addition to the four we brought to the marriage. So, we are severely outnumbered with a group of children ranging in age from 22 years to 19 months.

Schexnayder: <laugh> Sounds like there's never a dull moment around your home.

Judge Papillion: There is certainly never a quiet moment.

Schexnayder: How do you like being a federal judge?

Judge Papillion: Well, it's been just under three months as of the date of this interview, but I love it! I like it even more than I had hoped. There was a part of me that was a little concerned that, while everyone touted the benefits of a lifetime appointment, I feared it might be a "life sentence." And I can say that, after a few weeks, it is a really wonderful and gratifying job. It is full of variety. Everything from criminal law to admiralty, lots of

civil rights work. We have, of course, many different types of insurance claims and personal injury litigation. The Eastern District of Louisiana is an amazing court that sits at the mouth of one of the busiest commercial rivers in the world, above the Gulf of Mexico, in a large American city, but also encompasses rural areas. We hear cases involving the many types of legal issues that arise in that varied geography. So I like it a lot.

Schexnayder: Do you have a judicial philosophy?

Judge Papillion: My judicial philosophy is to try and be fair and to treat everyone with respect, to work hard, and to try to get the right result in every case. In order to properly decide the case, one must put his or her own personal views aside and follow precedent to get the right answer. I find that being, hopefully, a good judge is harder than being an advocate because, as a lawyer, I represented the client in the case I had, and my goal was to try and represent my client to the

best of my ability, but as a judge, I have to get the right answer.

Schexnayder: Thank you so much, Judge Papillion.

Judge Papillion: It has been my pleasure. Thank you.

Valerie T. Schexnayder is a mediator and arbitrator with Schexnayder Mediation Services, LLC, in Baton Rouge. She is beginning a two-year term as secretary of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) and as editor-in-chief of the Louisiana Bar Journal. She has practiced for more than 30 years with a large firm, a small firm and an international corporation and served as a LSBA Distinguished Access to Justice Pro Bono Fellow. She received a BBA degree in 1986 from Loyola University and her JD degree, cum laude, in 1989 from Tulane University Law School. (valschex@gmail.com; Ste. G, 17732 Highland Road, Baton Rouge, LA 70810)



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