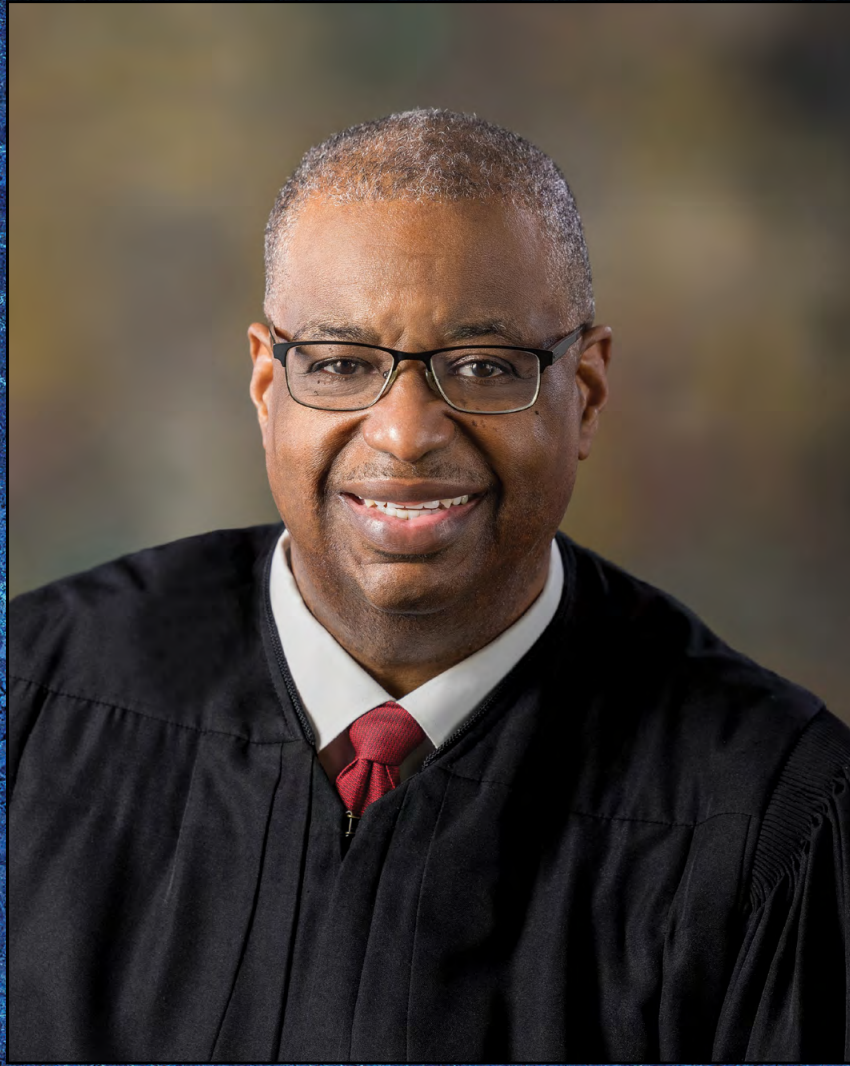


# Portraits & Perspectives:



*Associate Justice John Michael Guidry. Photo courtesy of Louisiana Supreme Court.*

## **One on One with Louisiana Supreme Court Associate Justice John Michael Guidry**

**Interviewed by Bradley J. Tate**



**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Good afternoon, Justice, and thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Tell me how have your first few months on the court been?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** They've been very good months. Fortunately, I was appointed in an ad hoc position to several cases on the December docket, so I had the opportunity to sit before officially joining the court in January. I also participated in administrative and conference matters that month. That experience was certainly beneficial. By the time I officially began my term on Jan. 1, I already had both administrative and adjudicative experience with the court, which made for a smooth transition. Since then, I've handled additional dockets, conference days and administrative matters. The work of the court has been very fulfilling so far.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Tell us about your background. Where did you grow up? What are some of your formative experiences from childhood? Where did you go to school?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I grew up in an area of Baton Rouge called South Baton Rouge, located between downtown and LSU. I attended public elementary schools in East Baton Rouge Parish, then enrolled at Southern University's Laboratory School in middle school. I later attended McKinley Middle and graduated from McKinley High School in 1980. I earned a bachelor's degree in political science from LSU in 1983, then attended Southern University Law Center from 1984 to 1987, graduating cum laude.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Did you always know you wanted to pursue a legal career? If not, what did you initially think?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** Well, as you grow up, people start asking, "What are you going to be?" From the earliest time I can remember, I always answered, "a lawyer." I watched several legal shows as a young person and was very intrigued by the law, so that naturally became my path. When I went to LSU, my major in political science was certainly geared toward ultimately going to law school.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Are there any mentors you've had in your career, and what impact have they had on your professional career?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I'll describe a mentor who had an impact on both my legal and political career. Although he was not a lawyer, his name was Joseph A. Delpit. He was a state representative from District 67 in Baton Rouge, where I grew up. I started out working in his chicken franchise business, the Chicken Shack, and from there became his legislative assistant. That gave me some exposure to the law because he was chairman of the Committee on Municipal and Parochial Affairs, which meant I got to serve as his clerk in that committee. I gained a very in-depth look at how the legislative process worked. When he became speaker pro tempore of the House of Representatives, I was appointed assistant clerk of the House. When he retired, he supported me, and I was fortunate to be elected to his seat in District 67. From there, I was elected to the Louisiana State Senate, and then to the Louisiana First Circuit Court of Appeal, where I spent roughly 27 years before being elected to the Supreme Court. That entire trajectory of public service and exposure to the law, particularly the legislative process, was a result of Representative Delpit taking an interest in a young man in his community and giving him an opportunity to be exposed to the Capitol, to public service, and to the workings of government. That was very beneficial to my career trajectory.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** That's the perfect segue into my next question – your career includes significant legislative service as a state representative and senator, how does serving in the legislature influence your perspective as a judge?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I think both as an employee of the legislature and while serving in office, I worked through every aspect—I was a sergeant at arms, a page, a committee clerk, and assistant clerk of the House. In those roles, I saw the groundwork and the process up close before eventually being elected to the House and the Senate, where I voted on those very matters. The most important

impact that time had on me as a judge was developing a deep respect for the separation of powers and checks and balances.

When I transitioned to the court, I brought with me the understanding that, as a legislator, I had been in the business of making policy and law. And in our civil law tradition, the law is considered the final expression of legislative will. I took that very seriously. As a judge, that perspective has guided me to recognize that my role is to interpret the law, not to make it. I've always said that if I wanted to make law, I would have stayed in the legislature. Because I joined the judiciary, I respect the distinct roles of our two coequal and coordinate branches of government. So, I don't view myself as a policymaker or a super legislator. My role is to interpret the law. If the law is clear, unambiguous and doesn't lead to an absurd result, my job is simply to apply it as written. If that is not the case, I should then look to determine the legislature's intent in passing the law. That experience in the legislative process has been invaluable to me as a judge, especially in understanding the legislature's role in our civil law tradition and legal system.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** As a longtime adjunct professor at the Southern Law Center, how has teaching students influenced your own understanding of the law?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** The students keep you fresh. They keep you challenged. They ask questions that make you think: "How did we get here?" or "Why are we here?" That constant examination of where we are in terms of the final product—the law I'm called upon to interpret—is important. Law students challenge you to think critically. They encourage you to question whether things make sense. That's a vital part of the learning process.

The other benefit of teaching is that it gives me the opportunity to sow into them. Throughout our careers and positions, we gain certain knowledge and experiences, and it would be a waste not to pass that on. Teaching gives me a chance to share my own experience and understanding of the law with a new generation of lawyers. I think that's really the value of teaching—to deposit that knowledge in others and



watch them carry it forward.

I taught for about 25 years at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Policy, in courses like American government, civil liberties, constitutional law and introduction to law. I also served as faculty adviser to the Pre-Law Society, and many of those students went on to law school—some of them I got to teach twice, once in undergrad and again in law school. Helping to keep that pipeline of future lawyers going was one of the most rewarding aspects of the teaching process.

I've always said that whether through teaching or community involvement, if people can see it, they can be it. To have a judge teaching in both undergrad and law school not only encourages students to pursue a legal career—or even a judicial one—but it also gives them access to a judge in a setting where they feel more comfortable asking questions. It humanizes the role. When they see how the law is explained or how a judge interacts in the classroom, it may inspire them to one day become a judge or remain committed to the profession. I've found it very beneficial and rewarding to be in the classroom with a new generation of lawyers.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Are you still getting to teach?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** Even with my new schedule, I've made an effort to stay in the classroom. I think it's even more beneficial now for me to be there, especially as a justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. I don't recall ever having a justice teach one of my law school classes—definitely not. So I think it's meaningful for students. I currently teach appellate advocacy. When I was on the court of appeal, we focused primarily on the intermediate appellate court perspective. Now that I'm on the Supreme Court, I've updated the syllabus to emphasize the Supreme Court's view of the appellate process. I believe that's a valuable addition for students.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** What inspired your ongoing commitment to legal education, public policy, and why do you think the connection between practice, policy, and teaching is important?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I have been blessed with the benefit of serving in several different roles. When I first ran for the Court of Appeal, my argument was that I had practiced the law as an attorney, taught the law as a long-term adjunct professor, and made the law as a legislator. Becoming a judge—where I would interpret the law—was a natural progression. I believe that the more avenues you've experienced within the legal system, the more effective you are as a judge.

So, when I go into the courtroom, I bring with me real experience as a practicing attorney. That gives me a unique perspective when reviewing cases or dealing with lawyer discipline—I've sat where they sit, and I understand the pressures, the practicalities and the responsibilities of practicing law. Having been a legislator, I also understand the legislature's expectation that judges will not act as super legislators. Our role is not to make the law, but to faithfully interpret and apply the law as it is written.

As a law professor, I've come to appreciate the value of education and outreach. I serve as vice chair of the Louisiana Supreme Court's Judges in the Classroom, Students in the Courtroom program, which encourages judges to visit schools, invite students and legislators to the courthouse, and explain our work to the public. It's all part of building public trust and transparency in the judiciary. Teaching takes many forms—whether you're lecturing in a classroom, speaking to a group of students during Law Week, or addressing civic groups.

Recently, I spoke at the Baton Rouge Bar Association's Law Day event, which included a naturalization ceremony led by the federal bench. After our new citizens were sworn in, I addressed both them and the students participating in the day's mock trial competitions. I believe we should take every opportunity, whether speaking at a school, a Rotary Club meeting, or a CLE seminar, to demystify what judges do and to promote a better understanding of our role.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** You've held numerous leadership positions, including president of the Louisiana Judicial College. What motivates you to take on these type of leadership roles?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I think it's important to lead with service. I see leadership through the lens of servant leadership, with service being the primary driver. When we offer ourselves for positions of leadership, we also bring our life experiences, our unique backgrounds and our perspectives to the table. For example, I've served as chair of the Judicial College, which educates all judges across the state, and as a two-term member of the Judicial Council, representing the Appellate Judges Conference. Both positions allowed me to engage with the ongoing improvement of judicial education and the proper administration of justice statewide.

My background in leadership has helped me bring initiatives forward. As a member of the Judicial Council, I worked with colleagues in the legislature, the State Bar, and local bars to build consensus around a statewide 50-cent civil filing fee. That funding supported the Judicial College's ability to bring in national speakers, expand its staff and technology, and better serve the bench. A trained and educated judiciary is essential to the democratic process, and my experience in both legislative and legal communities helped make the case for it. That effort may soon expand: at the time of this interview, legislation is pending to increase that filing fee to \$1.50. The additional funds would not only enhance judicial education but also support the Judiciary Commission, which has taken on a broader role in judicial discipline following a recent constitutional amendment.

My varied experience across the legislative, judicial and academic arenas has shaped how I serve on the Supreme Court. I've worked with the executive branch and legislature, I've taught in law schools and engaged in legal education reform, and I've worked to align the Judicial College with the strengths of our law school faculty. Those instructors help deliver training in both substantive and procedural law, and they're an essential part of preparing our judiciary for the demands of the profession.

When I recently spoke to new admittees to the Bar, I encouraged them to view their license as a call to serve. That includes pro bono work, involvement in local and specialty bar



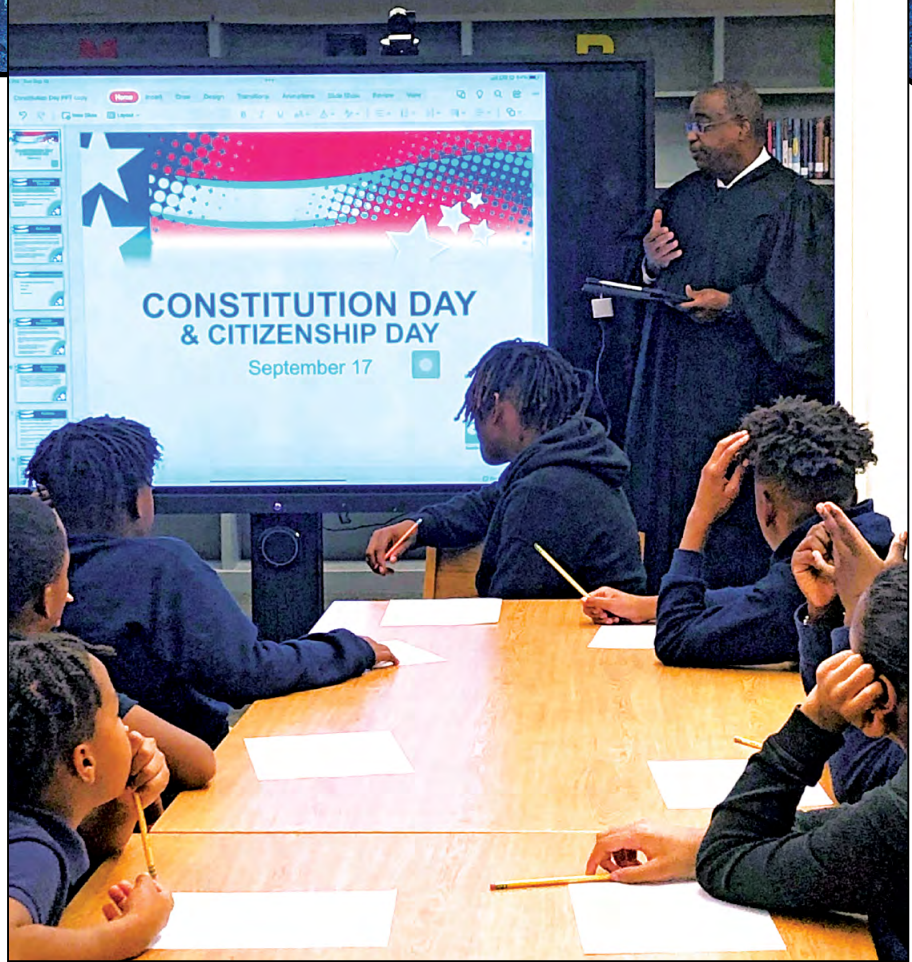
associations, and taking time to give back. I've benefited tremendously from being involved not only in the Louisiana State Bar Association but also in the Baton Rouge Bar Association, the Louisiana Judicial Council, National Bar Association, the American Bar Association and the Louis A. Martinet Legal Society.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** You've served on the Louisiana Domestic Violence Judicial Curriculum Advisory Committee and been involved with pro bono initiatives and organizations like the Baton Rouge Bar Association Pro Bono Committee – why is it important to volunteer and do pro bono?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** It's important because we have to be concerned about the least of these, those who do not have the resources to access justice. We must ensure that people can find lawyers who are willing to give their time when someone cannot afford legal representation. We cannot allow individuals in our communities who lack financial means to be excluded from a process that is so vital to our democracy. People need an outlet, an opportunity to resolve disputes peacefully and to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. A major part of that is having access to the courts and the protection of the rule of law.

All of our work is for naught if not everyone has access. As lawyers and even as judges (because judges are still lawyers), we should always remember that this is a calling, not just a career. We do this for life, not for a living. Professionalism means giving back. It means being involved in your local bar and in your community. It means recognizing that, in a democratic society, no one is above the law and no one is beneath it. Everyone should have access to legal remedies and the courts.

The only way to make that a reality, especially in today's economy, is for lawyers to give their time. Lawyers must approach the profession with the mindset that we are here to serve. Judges must care more about justice than the title of judgeship. We must be willing to reach beyond our chambers and courtrooms to help foster confidence in our legal system. That requires transparency, accountability and a shared sense of responsibility.



In 2022, Justice John Michael Guidry spoke to Scotlandville Magnet School students about civics and Constitution Day as part of the Louisiana Judges and Lawyers in the Classroom program. Photo provided by the Louisiana Supreme Court.

Our democracy cannot survive without a free and independent judiciary that people trust. If the public feels they can't turn to the courts for help, we leave them with few other options. That's why access to justice must remain a core commitment for everyone in the legal profession.

I tell lawyers: Make money, but make a difference. Take time to give back. You've been afforded a great opportunity through your legal education and career. Service, especially through pro bono work, helps ensure that people have meaningful access to justice. And access to peaceful resolution of legal issues is vital to a functioning democracy.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** You currently chair the Louisiana Supreme Court Technology Commission. How do you envision technology shaping the future of Louisiana's courts, and all courts after the pandemic fueled acceleration of remote proceedings in the age of AI?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I think

there's no going back. People now understand the role that technology can play in improving access to justice. Remote hearings and other tools help reduce costs, costs that would otherwise be passed on to clients. To the extent that we can use technology to serve the public more efficiently, we ought to use it. And as part of our professional responsibility, we must recognize that competence today includes not only substantive and procedural law, but also technological proficiency.

Judges, as gatekeepers, must understand what is being submitted to the courts. That includes developments in artificial intelligence. The concern with AI is the old saying: junk in, junk out. Some courts, like the U.S. Fifth Circuit, have explored requiring certification on whether AI was used in a submission. While that particular proposal wasn't adopted, other federal and state courts are considering similar measures. Lawyers need to remember that they are officers of the court, and they are ethically and professionally responsible for the materials they sign and submit,



regardless of whether AI was involved.

We've seen real-world examples where AI-generated briefs included nonexistent cases. That's not just a technical glitch, it's a failure in professional responsibility. Experienced lawyers may spot these issues quickly because of their in-depth knowledge in a particular area of law. Context matters. That's why lawyers must verify and review everything, especially when using AI tools. Before submitting anything, you must ensure it's accurate, complete and honest. That's fundamental to our ethical rules, and AI doesn't change that, it just heightens the need for vigilance.

Lawyers must stay competent in the technologies they choose to use. If we don't self-regulate, regulation will come from elsewhere, whether from the Supreme Court or the legislature. It's better that we address these challenges ourselves. Another aspect of this conversation is how technology may gradually displace, not necessarily replace, certain legal tasks traditionally performed by lawyers.

There will always be areas where the experience and judgment of a licensed attorney are irreplaceable. Not everything can or should be done through forms on automated platforms. That's where the courts and the legislature must play a gate-keeping role, balancing access, efficiency and professional standards.

As chair of the Supreme Court's Technology Committee, we are also addressing issues beyond AI, such as basic infrastructure. Not every court in Louisiana has the same technological capacity. In some parishes, electronic filing or even reliable internet access is still a challenge. We're working toward a system where every court, clerk of court and judge can communicate electronically, from the trial level all the way to the Supreme Court.

The goal is seamless, paperless records and filings statewide, where a lawyer in New Orleans or Bunkie can electronically file and access digital court records from any courthouse in Louisiana. That kind of uniformity saves time and money, which ultimately helps clients and improves access to justice. If a lawyer no longer has to drive across the state to file a pleading, that's a cost not passed on to the client.

The legislature has given us a technol-

ogy fund, and the Supreme Court is using it to prioritize the courts with the greatest need, starting with hardware, software and basic systems. We're gradually building out from there: strengthening district courts, investing in appellate courts and launching a new case management system at the Supreme Court. That benefits the entire state, because ultimately everything filters up to the high court. Without the Supreme Court being able to receive what comes through the system, the process breaks down.

So we're focused on building a modern, efficient judicial system that balances the needs of all Louisiana courts and supports access to justice in every corner of the state.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** What motivated you to seek election to the Supreme Court?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** Ultimately, one of the reasons I ran for the Louisiana Supreme Court was because of that unique path: I had practiced law, taught the law, made the law and, for 27 years, interpreted the law. I believed that perspective, and that life experience, could be of value to the state's highest court. When you're blessed with different opportunities, I think it's your duty to use them in service to others. That's why I stepped forward to serve, because I believed those past experiences could benefit the judiciary and the people of Louisiana.

When you've been given so much, you want to deposit as much of it as you can into students, new lawyers, and fellow judges. Serving on the Supreme Court gave me the opportunity to share that experience more broadly and work on issues that have long been important to me.

One example is domestic violence. Had I not been elected to the Supreme Court, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to offer the motion that passed and now requires all judges in Louisiana to receive mandatory domestic violence and trauma-informed training. That's the kind of policy impact that can happen more effectively at the Supreme Court level.

Similarly, I chaired the technology committee at the Court of Appeal and later served as chief judge. But now, as a member of the Supreme Court, I can help shape statewide judicial technology pol-

icy. I also have the ability to work more directly with the legislature when it's time to seek funding for the judiciary. My past experience and understanding of the legislative process help when we advocate for the resources we need.

Being both a law professor and a former chair of the Judicial College, I've also worked to strengthen the connection between legal education and judicial training. As a Supreme Court justice, I can continue building those partnerships and ensuring that our law schools, one of our greatest resources, are part of educating and preparing judges across the state.

Everything I've been involved in over the years, education, legislative service, appellate work, technology, pro bono, can now have a broader impact. I've served on pro bono committees and been involved in both local and specialty bars since the beginning of my legal career. But when a Supreme Court justice encourages lawyers to give back, that message can carry more weight. And I take that responsibility seriously.

So ultimately, transitioning to the Supreme Court has given me a greater platform to be of service, not just to the judiciary, but to the state as a whole. That's why I ran. It was about putting all those experiences to work for the greater good.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Looking back at your time on the bench so far, what has been the most rewarding aspect of being a judge?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I think the most rewarding aspect of being a judge is having the opportunity to truly do justice. Of course, we're constrained by the law as written by the legislature. We're constrained by standards of review and even in our civil tradition of *jurisprudence constante*, precedent still plays an incidental role. But at the end of the day, particularly on the Supreme Court, you have the opportunity to ensure that the rule of law is followed and that people have had their day in court. They may not always like the outcome, but at least they can say that, all the way up to the Louisiana Supreme Court, they had the chance to vindicate their rights as citizens. That's not something everyone gets to experience every



day, and it's something I take seriously.

I felt the same way when I was practicing law. To me, the most rewarding part of being a lawyer was serving as a voice for the voiceless, being able to speak truth. That was something I valued deeply during my time as a legislator as well: the opportunity to speak truth to power. That's one of the privileges of having a law degree and living in a country governed by the rule of law. You get the chance to effect justice and make a difference.

As a legislator, I was in the business of making policy. I don't get to do that anymore. But now, as a judge, I have the responsibility of ensuring that the policies enacted are interpreted and implemented properly. That transition has been meaningful, and I believe the ability to make a difference, especially for people who might otherwise go unheard, is the most rewarding part of my role.

As a justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, my job is to interpret the law without bias, to be neither bought nor bossed, and to carry out my duties without fear or favor. That kind of judicial independence is something I value deeply. On the state's highest court, I have the privilege of helping ensure that people's legal matters are resolved fairly, with integrity. That's a good feeling and a freedom I truly enjoy.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Outside of your professional life, what interests or hobbies do you enjoy? How do you spend your free time?

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** As much time with family as I can. One of the things about public service, and I've noticed this even more on the Supreme Court, is that there are a lot of time commitments beyond performing your official duties. People expect you to be present in a lot of different places. So whenever I have an opportunity to break away and be with family, I take it. At the end of the day, family and friends are extremely important. You have to maintain a work-life balance, and I try to prioritize that as much as possible.

My son lives in Houston, and I try to get there as much as I can. My daughter is finishing her senior year at LSU, and she's still living at home, so I'm enjoying this time with her before she heads off to grad-



In 2011, Southern University Law Center professionalism orientation, included, from left, (then) Judge John M. Guidry, Terri Ricks, Judge Kirk A. Williams, Bertha I. Taylor, Travis A. Taylor and Cynthia N. Reed. Photo by LSBA staff.

uate school. My wife, who is currently a visiting professor at Southern University Law Center and is a retired deputy general counsel for the Department of Insurance, and I try to travel together, go to the movies, and spend as much time as possible doing things we enjoy as a family. My mother, who will always be my greatest hero, is 92 years old, and I am blessed to be able to spend quality time with her and other family members.

I also like getting outside and walking around my neighborhood for fresh air. I enjoy going to the movies, and I try to read as much non-legal material as I can, though there's not much time for that anymore. One of the biggest differences in transitioning to the Supreme Court is the amount of reading and administrative work. On the intermediate appellate court, I did more writing. Now, I do much more reading of writ applications to determine what I will write, and I also handle more administrative work, in addition to lawyer and judicial discipline matters.

When I get the chance to read something other than a brief, I really enjoy it. And I try to emphasize to lawyers during CLE programs that the practice of law is high-pressure and demanding. That makes it even more important to create a work-life balance. Don't lose sight of the things that matter, like your family, your health, your mental and emotional well-being. Finding time for those things isn't just nice - it's necessary.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** Tell us about your family and how they have supported your legal career.

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** I have been extremely blessed with a loving and

supportive wife and two wonderful children. One of the sacrifices of public service is that you're often away from them. You're away from family, and that's never easy. But they've supported me emotionally every step of the way. And not only that, they've knocked on doors, put up signs, and done all the grassroots work that comes with campaigning. I've truly been blessed.

Still, I'm always conscious, especially when it comes to my wife and children, of making sure they never feel I valued public service more than I valued them. That means finding time for family outings, baseball games, football games, and dance recitals. Those moments have always been far more important than any title I've held. My role as a husband and father has always meant more to me than being a Supreme Court justice, a chief judge, or a legislator.

At the end of the day, family is what matters most. And I've been fortunate not only to have their support, but also to have a wife who's been present for our children when I had to be away, speaking to other people's children, trying to uplift and encourage them. Grace has always been there with ours. That's been one of my biggest concerns with public service, the time it takes from home. But I've been blessed to have a family that's understood and supported that commitment. And that's made all the difference.

**Brad Tate / LBJ:** I appreciate you taking the time to do this with us today.

**Justice John Michael Guidry:** Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this interview and to share insights into my service on the court and commitment to the legal profession.