

# Keeping Family in the Forefront

*A Husband and Wife began Their Journey at Washburn Law. Now, Their Children Joined Them for an Important Moment.*

*By Angela Lutz*

For **Francesca Montes-Williams, '01**, and **Eric N. Williams, '01**, Washburn University School of Law is all about family. And in recent years, that connection has only grown stronger. It all began 25 years ago when Francesca moved to Topeka from her home in Florida. Three of her family members had attended Washburn and her cousin promised she would love the school, but for a girl used to soft sands and warm breezes, the winter weather came as a shock.

“It was 13 degrees and I was so excited about trying to catch snowflakes – it was a whole different world for me,” Francesca recalled. “I think Eric thought that was great.”

As she adjusted to frozen precipitation and the chill in the air, Francesca had something else going for her as well: her burgeoning romance with Eric, whom she met in their shared classes at Washburn. Right away the young law students found each other intriguing. Francesca remembers the two enjoying many intelligent conversations. After only a few weeks in class together, Francesca asked Eric out to lunch and the rest, as they say, is history.

## *Husband-and-Wife Team of Judges*

After law school, Eric and Francesca got married and had two children: their now 19-year-old son, Eric, in his second semester of college, and 15-year-old daughter, Francesca, finishing her freshman year in high school. They have also built their respective legal careers, with Eric serving as a district judge assigned to the criminal division and Francesca a district judge assigned to the family law division. Impressively, they've both been elected to positions in the 18th Judicial District in Sedgwick County, Kansas, making them the only team of spouses of district judges in the state. This professional connection has given their personal relationship a new dimension of depth and understanding.

“We can certainly relate to what's happening with each other,” Eric said. “Having worked around the legal world for the last 20 years, we have an especially rich understanding of how the courthouse works, and we support each other that way.”

“Eric has really been my right arm walking me through the differences from hearing officer to district judge,” Francesca added. “Some of the questions that come up, he understands



Hon. Francesca Montes-Williams, '01, and Hon. Eric N. Williams, '01, with their children for her swearing-in. Photo submitted

it because he's been through it. We've always tried to keep it separate too. But we understand the challenges and when we need to, we can bounce things off each other.”

For each of them, becoming a judge was the fulfillment of a long-time ambition. Sworn in six years ago, Eric previously presided over juvenile, traffic, and criminal first-appearance cases before beginning his current role. He has also worked as a prosecutor and as general counsel for the state agency that licenses and regulates law enforcement, giving him the well-rounded experience he needed to become a judge.

“The most rewarding thing about being a judge is helping people and having an impact on the community,” Eric said. “I want to make the courthouse accessible to everybody and make sure everybody gets a fair trial.”

Francesca, meanwhile, previously worked as an administrative hearing officer in Sedgwick County presiding over child support enforcement cases and was sworn in as a district judge this January, making her the newest of the district's 30 judges. She believes strongly in the value of public service and hopes to use her position to make a positive difference in people's lives.

“It was a natural transition going from hearing officer to district judge, and I believe it gives me the opportunity to help more people in Sedgwick County,” Francesca said. “There are a lot of families that come to the courthouse and need answers, and I want to make the decision that's in the best interest of the children. I'm going to treat people the way I want to be

treated if I were on the other side of the bench. If I can make one difference for one kid, it will be worth it.”

### *All About Family*

Like Francesca, Eric also has a family connection to Washburn through his father, **Jackie Williams, '71**. Pursuing a legal career seemed like a natural choice for Eric as his father worked at the U.S. attorney's office for most of Eric's childhood and retired as the U.S. attorney for the state of Kansas. His father's influence has been a guiding force in Eric's life.

“He has been a long-time influence on my legal career and on Francesca's as well,” Eric said. “He's a great guy. I can't even put that into words. I meet people all the time who talk about what a good guy he is. He's been on the right side of the line my whole life. He is the quintessential public servant.”

For Eric and Francesca, the emphasis on family values came full circle during Francesca's swearing-in ceremony. This wasn't their first time, either. For Eric's ceremony six years ago, Francesca held the Bible and their children were present, so she knew she wanted the same for her big day. This time, her children held the Bible and Eric swore her in, making the event a memorable occasion for the whole family. Eric's father was present in the audience, along with friends and relatives from both sides of the family. Having strong support gave Francesca the push she needed to pursue her dreams.

“When I took on this position, we talked to the kids because I knew I would be tied to the office more,” Francesca said. “With their support, I went for this. Having them there that day was incredible, and my kids were so proud and excited.

It was just the four of us, and it was so special. There are no words for that. It was amazing that day.”

“It was a pretty packed courtroom,” Eric added. “Family is everything to us, so being able to participate in Francesca's swearing-in was so meaningful for us.”

---

“The most rewarding thing about being a judge is helping people and having an impact on the community. I want to make the courthouse accessible to everybody and make sure everybody gets a fair trial.”

— Eric Williams

---

For their kids, Eric and Francesca hope they are not only creating powerful memories but also setting a strong example of what it means to work hard and achieve their goals.

“There was something very special about my young daughter looking at me and being so proud,” Francesca said. “It was a great moment. It's always been about letting our kids know that if you put in the work, it will pay off. And they got to see that with their dad and again years later with their mom. Especially being Hispanic and a woman, it's a big deal, and I love being able to share that with my kids.”



Family and friends gather for Montes-Williams' swearing-in. Photo submitted



## *Strong Washburn Roots*

Going forward, Eric and Francesca are both glad to be working in legal areas they feel strongly about, and they recognize the great responsibility they have in serving their community.

“I’ve always been involved in the criminal law side of things,” Eric said. “I enjoyed working with juvenile offenders and the traffic and criminal first-appearance cases, but I’m passionate about criminal code and criminal law and how that impacts the community. I’m glad to be back in that realm.”

Francesca in particular knows that if she can help make a positive impact on the lives of the children she encounters in family court today, maybe she can help them avoid a visit to her husband’s criminal courtroom in the future.

“I’m passionate about helping kiddos and families,” Francesca said. “These kids are going to be the leaders for the future and if we can make a difference now, maybe they won’t end up in Eric’s courtroom and we can help them early on in their lives.”

For their successful careers, Eric and Francesca both credit their Washburn education with helping them get where they wanted to go. They cited influential visits from Washburn University School of Law alumni and participating in trial advocacy programs as particularly beneficial to their educational experience, as it gave them real-world evidence that they could dream big and achieve their goals.

“I drive by Washburn when I’m in Topeka, and boy that campus has grown,” Eric said. “Washburn was great. I really enjoyed the tight-knit community. There were a lot of opportunities, and they did a lot to prepare you for the real world.”

“The professors always had that open-door policy,” Francesca added. “Especially being so far away from home and being pretty much on my own, they were always there if you had questions. They would even say ‘Hey, here’s my phone number, call me anytime.’ You weren’t just a number at Washburn. The professors really wanted you to succeed, and it showed. Eric and I have done really well with that strong foundation Washburn gave us.”

