

Giving People Their Day in Court

Kuckelman strives to be fair, enjoy everyday aspects of justice.

By Anglea Lutz

When **Jerry Kuckelman, BA '81, JD '85**, looks back on his legal career, there isn't much he would change. It all began with a childhood fascination with history and biographies of United States presidents who were also lawyers, like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Several years later, while attending the Washburn University School of Law, Kuckelman secured an internship at the Wabaunsee County Attorney's office, solidifying his interest in the criminal justice system.

"I was able to try two jury trials that year along with numerous bench trials," Kuckelman said. "I was in the courtroom arguing cases from day one. It was really great because you learn a lot in the classroom, but when you're actually in the courtroom doing it, that's really beneficial as a law student. I couldn't overstate how valuable that internship was to me."

Working in a small community, Kuckelman also got to witness the full scope of the legal process, including the responsibilities of police and probation officers in addition to judges and attorneys. He went to labs to see how they do their testing and visited crime scenes – "all the CSI stuff – the real deal," he said.

"Everybody wants to go to the big prestigious firms, but in a small place like Wabaunsee County, I was in the front row," Kuckelman added. "I was able to see law in action."

Upon graduation, Kuckelman worked as an assistant attorney general in the criminal division for the state of Kansas, which allowed him to travel around the state and try cases. Then he returned to his hometown of Atchison, Kansas, where he had a general law and criminal defense private practice for 13 years before becoming the Atchison County attorney, a position he held for 18 years. He was named the Kansas Prosecutor of the Year in 2011.

"I had the opportunity to see the justice system from both the prosecution side and the defense side," Kuckelman said. "I always enjoyed having real people for clients, as opposed to a big firm practice. I got the opportunity to help real people with real problems."

After 33 years practicing law, Kuckelman was appointed as a judge in the 1st Judicial District of Leavenworth and Atchison Counties by Kansas Gov. Jeff Colyer in 2018. Kuckelman



Jerry Kuckelman, BA '81, JD '85. Photo by Earl Richardson

said the most important part of his role as a judge is being fair and arriving at correct legal decisions, adding that his well-rounded legal experience has helped him greatly in his current occupation.

As Kuckelman settles into the next phase of his career, he is grateful for the many ways he has been able to serve his clients and uphold the law over the years. As a judge, he takes special care to give everyone their day in court, which he said can be challenging in busy courtrooms with crowded dockets.

"I have always enjoyed every aspect of the practice of law," he said. "I hear so many colleagues say they're burned out, and I never hit that. I've enjoyed every day of it, and I still do."