

# Federal Court

*Mentors, dedication to work were key to judges' success.*

*By Angela Lutz*

Growing up in a single-parent household in Kansas City, Kansas, **Gwynne Birzer, BA '89, JD '92**, always worked hard for what she had – but by the time she reached junior college, she still hadn't settled on a career path. Then she found her calling while watching her favorite television show.

"The Cosby Show came on and I saw Clair Huxtable," Birzer said. "I saw someone on TV who looked like me, and she was so sharp and businesslike, and she was a lawyer. That's what planted the seed. I'm not sure I ever met a lawyer growing up, but I thought – maybe I can be a lawyer. And off I went."

While pursuing an undergraduate degree in criminal justice at Washburn University, Birzer also worked the night shift at Frito Lay, and later during law school she became the legal guardian for her niece after the death of her older sister. She frequently became overwhelmed by the enormity of her

responsibility paired with her ambition – but she always had Washburn University School of Law Director of Admissions Dottie Harder cheering her on.

"She gave me so much hope," Birzer said. "She encouraged me to continue to try, and she introduced me to the Council on Legal Education Opportunity. She was a friendly face. She knew I could do it – even when I lost my sense of hope sometimes, she gave it back to me. Washburn felt like a family."

After a well-rounded career including time in a private practice and service as an assistant public defender, assistant district attorney, and assistant attorney general, in 2015, Birzer was appointed to the U.S. Court for the District of Kansas as a magistrate judge. She considers this the ultimate highlight of her career.

"In the federal system, a U.S. magistrate judge is the first face of authority people see when they come to court," she said. "Federal court can be scary. The cases are not only complex but also very serious, and there are a lot of rules involved. I hope that I have the ability to let litigants know they are going to be heard and treated fairly, even if the matter is not resolved in their favor."

Across the state on a cattle and wheat farm, **Eric Melgren, '85**, also never met a lawyer growing up, but he and his sisters were encouraged to pursue higher education. As an elementary school student, Melgren developed an interest in the law and the Constitution.

"Even before I was a teenager, I knew I was going to go to law school," he said. "I liked the orderliness of the legal system. I've always had a strong sense of justice – wanting wrongs to be made right and people who had been wronged to get relief."

After becoming one of the first people in his family to attend college and earning his law degree at Washburn, Melgren was accepted for a federal clerkship with Judge Frank Theis, not knowing what a boon this position would be to his burgeoning career. Following a successful tenure as partner at Foulston



Gwynne Birzer, BA '89, JD '92. Photo submitted

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Siefkin in Wichita, Melgren was appointed U.S. attorney for Kansas in 2002 and as a district judge for the U.S. Court for the District of Kansas in 2008, where he now sits in Theis’ chambers.

“One of the things I love about being a judge is I can look at a situation and do the right thing,” Melgren said. “It’s very satisfying in this job to say that this is what I think the law supports and justice requires, so this is what I’m going to do. It goes full circle to what attracted me to the law as a child.”

**Thomas Marten, BA ’73, JD ’76**, also grew up in a rural Kansas town, but he did have a legal professional in the family – former U.S. District Court and Court of Appeals Judge **Delmas Hill, ’29**, who Marten just called Uncle Buzz. Hill encouraged Marten to pursue a legal vocation, and the incentive paid off – after a long and varied career that included more than 20 years in Uncle Buzz’s chambers, Marten took senior status in the U.S. Court for the District of Kansas in 2017.

Despite his many successes, Marten said the best moments in his legal practice “were nothing you’d hang a banner about.” He recalled with pride the divorce cases where he helped women through difficult times or when he assisted someone accused of a crime as they attempted to navigate the legal system. In recognition of his many accomplishments, Marten received Washburn Law’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016.

“I never went for the grades,” Marten said of Washburn. “I was always more interested in experiences. One of the things Washburn did for me is that while they value academic success, they also established that what you do with your life is much more important. Washburn was central to my understanding that there’s a huge world out there, and you ought to plunge in and choose to make a positive difference.”



Eric Melgren, '85. Photo by Jeff Tuttle



Thomas Marten, BA '73, JD '76. Photo submitted