

2006

Mike Wolff: From Champion Law Clerk to Chief Justice

Miles W. Lord

Miles W. Lord & Associates

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/lj>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miles W. Lord, *Mike Wolff: From Champion Law Clerk to Chief Justice*, 50 St. Louis U. L.J. (2006).
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/lj/vol50/iss2/6>

This Tribute is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Saint Louis University Law Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarship Commons. For more information, please contact [Susie Lee](#).

**MIKE WOLFF:
FROM CHAMPION LAW CLERK TO CHIEF JUSTICE**

MILES W. LORD*

I appreciate the opportunity to reminisce about my friend and former law clerk, Mike Wolff.

When the University of Minnesota Law School sent me some resumes of third year students interested in a law clerk position for the 1970–1971 clerkship year, Mike Wolff’s name jumped out. The resume said he was a reporter for the *Minneapolis Star*, the afternoon daily paper. I seemed to remember his byline on newspaper articles on controversial subjects including some “lifestyle” reporting that had once been taboo for a family newspaper. I called a friend who was an editor of the newspaper and he confirmed that Mike had been assigned a variety of such subjects, trusting that he could write carefully and in good taste without “being offensive or vulgar.”

He assured me that Mike could write. I also wanted to know if he could spell. My friend might have been a little puzzled by this question, but he said Mike had started as a copy editor on the paper and that he could indeed spell and edit. So I called Mike up one night at the *Star* and told him that I had a “hot tip.” The tip was that I had an opening for a law clerk, and I invited him over for an interview. He showed up in a kind of dark, shiny green suit, certainly not the style of the day, not then and not now. He later told me that it was the first suit he had ever owned, bought for him by his father that year, and the choice was made because it was the only suit in the store that fit him. He was very tall and kind of gangly. He said he made it through college with a single sport coat and a clip-on tie. When he went to work for the newspaper, he had bought another sport coat and a real tie. Reporters in those days were not well paid or well dressed. Becoming a law clerk didn’t help much either.

When I met and talked with Mike, I remembered that some friends of mine were friends of his mother who worked at the Mayo Clinic. As a young lawyer, I had represented two old women who ran the Post Office in a small town in southern Minnesota and who were relatives of Mike’s mother. These women had been charged with opening people’s letters and reading them. Though Mike had never met these relatives, he had heard their story. He and I agreed that opening the mail was not that big of a deal since, in a town that

* United States District Judge, retired.

small, everybody knows your business anyway. The ladies were just getting more details, he said.

So we hit it off. There was a comfortable synergism about our approach to legal problems. It was a pleasure to work with a young man who was not mesmerized by wealth or power, and who could give full consideration to the economic facts of life. Mike always tried to “make the law come out right.”

The drafting of judicial opinions can be tricky stuff. I was grateful for his skill as a writer, knowing that facts can be embarrassing or humiliating for the litigants or victims. And I was thankful for his spelling. I recalled that, as a brand spanking new federal district judge a few years before, I was proud to be called upon to serve on a three-judge court with Judge Harry Blackmun, for whom I had served as a law clerk years before when he was a practicing lawyer in Minneapolis. When Judge Blackmun reviewed my opinion for the court, he sent it back with several spelling corrections. I knew Judge Blackmun was meticulous and precise in his writing. I was embarrassed by the mistakes, having paid the price for my rush to clean up my calendar. After that experience, it was the right thing to hire Mike Wolff many years before “spell check” arrived to help my legal career.

In our year together, we traveled to Little Rock, Arkansas, and to Miami, Florida, where I served as a visiting judge. In Little Rock I conducted five jury trials in one week. It was great to have efficient lawyers, of course, and I could not have done it without such an efficient law clerk. Mike called it “the month we spent in Little Rock one week,” probably referring to the fact that Little Rock was then a “dry” town.

When Mike left me after the one-year clerkship, it seemed natural that he would go to work for the underdog. I followed his work in legal aid problems in St. Paul, Denver, and Rapid City, South Dakota, as well as his career as a Saint Louis University law professor and his life in politics and public service in Missouri. I have known his wife, Patricia, since she was in medical school when Mike was clerking for me. I admire her great work as a doctor, first with the Indians in South Dakota, then as a practicing pediatrician, and lately serving people in third-world countries. Pat and Mike raised two fine sons: one a doctor and the other on his way to becoming a lawyer. They have had excellent role models.

I am happy that we have maintained our friendship over the years. Mike and Pat’s lifelong dedication to community service and concern for those who have been left behind in society have increased my admiration for them.

Mike is a born diplomat and treats everybody with dignity and respect. He was a champion law clerk. He will be a champion chief justice.