

# Fostering Collaboration

*By Finding a Middle Ground, Attorney Brings Together Families and Political Parties*

*By Chris Marshall*

When Mike Kuckelman started his career as an attorney, he encountered friends with fertility issues. He saw the emotional and financial toll hopeful parents encountered trying unsuccessfully to conceive. He also saw them struggle with the adoption process. Adoption can be expensive for these young couples, so he decided he would help by providing adoption legal work pro bono.

Over his three decades of legal practice, Kuckelman, BBA '86, JD '90, has assisted families in navigating the adoption process. For someone who has a lot on his plate as a founder of Kuckelman Torline Kirkland law firm in Overland Park, Kansas, a board member at Benedictine College, and chairman of the Kansas Republican Party, he says this small part of his practice brings him the most fulfillment.

“Someone at Washburn asked me what my favorite part of my career is, and I said, ‘That’s easy, it’s the adoption side of it.’ It’s the most fulfilling work I’ve done. I’ve handled lots of interesting litigation, but there’s nothing better than seeing a family unit come together.”

- Mike Kuckelman

“For me, it’s a welcome break from my normal litigation to see the happiness it brings someone and their family,” he said. “I’ve done adoption cases for so many years that many of the babies are now young adults out in the community working jobs. I see and hear from them on some occasions, and some send me notes when something happens in life. I’ve received invitations to some of their high school graduations, and thanks to social media, I can keep up with a few of the children and see their fulfilled lives.”

Those shows of appreciation can be a mood-lifter for an attorney who spends a majority of his time on dourer, yet no less important, civil cases. After the terrorist attack on Sept.

11, 2001, Kuckelman was appointed by the federal court in New York to serve as a member of the WTC Executive Committee, where he was responsible for prosecuting the civil cases that arose from the terrorist attack. More recently, the SEC appointed him in Texas to pursue recovery of losses perpetuated in one of the largest Ponzi schemes in U.S. history.

More locally, Kuckelman prosecutes civil rights cases involving police officers who violate citizens’ rights. He says he’s a big supporter of law enforcement and calls the majority of officers honorable public servants. His goal is to prosecute the 1 or 2 percent who risk giving that majority a bad reputation.

“Those cases are also rewarding because it’s important we protect the constitutional rights of citizens from the government,” he said. “The people who need that protection the most are probably those who are involved in disputes with law enforcement at the time.”

While many have adopted a firm stance for or against the police in recent years, Kuckelman avoids generalizations and instead focuses on the information available on a case-by-case basis. The ability to form arguments based on facts, without stooping to a level that gets personal, is something he says he first picked up at Washburn.

“Being respectful and civil to the person on the other side of an issue is something we learned firsthand in class at Washburn Law,” he said. “The professors would call on folks and purposely pull out both sides of a legal opinion. It was always professional, never personal. You can have a big disagreement without degrading yourself or the other person.”

That approach has served him well in the courtroom and in his role with the Kansas GOP. His four years in the elected volunteer position have taken him to major political events, including Republican National Conventions. In 2020, Kuckelman was the delegate who stood up on the convention floor to cast Kansas’ vote for a presidential nominee.

Wichita attorney Bill Cummings is on the opposite end of the political spectrum, but has remained close since the two attended Washburn, in part because of his friend’s impartiality.

“Our politics are opposite, and he believes strongly in a lot of things I disagree with,” Cummings said. “But I don’t know a better guy or lawyer in the state.”

Cummings, owner of Cummings & Cummings Law Firm with his wife, Nika, also graduated from Washburn Law in 1990 and was in the same section as Kuckelman.

“I don’t get along with every Republican like I do with Mike,” Cummings said. “He’s very accepting of my viewpoint and doesn’t look at me like I’m some crazed liberal from outer space. He’ll say, ‘I understand Bill, and we can disagree.’ He’s remarkable, the way he can disarm you.”

Even those who disagree with Kuckelman’s viewpoints can appreciate his work as a civil servant. In 2021, Washburn presented him a distinguished service award for his legal career and volunteer efforts for several charities and schools.

Kuckelman’s ability to impact others inspired his two sons to follow in his footsteps. His youngest, Matthew, inherited Mike’s passion for politics, and now works in Washington, DC for the Republican National Committee and plans to attend law school in the future. His oldest son, Jacob, is in his third year at Washburn Law and works part-time at the Douglas County district attorney’s office. His daughter, Sara, opted to practice medicine rather than law and is a pediatrician at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City.

Kuckelman’s influence on the next generation will soon extend even further beyond just family. He provided a gift to the Kuckelman Family Scholarship Fund, which will be awarded to an incoming Washburn student in January 2023. His goal is to provide a scholarship opportunity for future students interested in public service and in particular, constitutional law.

“Someone at Washburn asked me to name the favorite case of my career, and I said, ‘That’s easy, my favorite cases are the adoptions I handled. It’s the most fulfilling work I’ve done,’ he said. “I’ve handled lots of interesting litigation, but there’s nothing better than seeing a family unit come together and now, seeing it impact another generation. One of the ‘babies’ recently married and started her own family, giving birth to a beautiful daughter.”



Mike Kuckelman, BBA '86, JD '90. Photo submitted