



Director Tony Mattivi, '94, and Hon. Mary Mattivi, '94. Photo by Jeremy Wangler

Law in Common

For One Couple, Washburn Law School was the Foundation of Professional Success with a Happy Marriage and Family

By Lindsay Thompson

Director **Tony Mattivi, '94**, and Judge **Mary Mattivi, '94**, found more than just a great legal education at Washburn University School of Law, they found each other. In the 29 years since they graduated, they have been on a unique and sometimes challenging adventure, building fascinating careers and raising a family together.

The two grew up states apart, Tony in Colorado and Mary in Missouri.

Early careers and educational pursuits were not without their trials. After dropping out of college, Tony was considering a career and worked for several years as an EMT and a paramedic. He would later decide that college was unfinished business and went back to obtain his bachelor's degree before ultimately deciding to go on and earn an advanced degree. Earning a C in organic chemistry deterred him from pursuing medical school, and after speaking with current law school students at the time, he chose to pursue a law degree at Washburn.

Mary, however, had a more traditional path to law school. She studied criminal justice as an undergraduate in Missouri and did not consider law school until a professor asked her what she planned to do with her degree. After working in a district attorney's office, she realized room for advancement was incredibly limited without that degree. It was a fateful decision that would lead her to Washburn as well.

The two met at orientation. They became part of the same circle of friends, spending time together studying and socializing. The group of future attorneys also had a special Thursday night ritual.

"You did not miss LA Law on Thursday night," Mary said. "Nobody missed that. Everybody gathered."

Tony and Mary started dating during their second year of law school. They enjoyed having a shared academic pursuit. They commiserated about difficult classes and respected one another's need to spend long hours studying. Although Mary joked that Tony took it to greater extremes than she did.

“There are two examples I will never forget,” Mary said. “One of them was when the season finale of Seinfeld was on. He studied instead of watching it. I was like, ‘There is no way I am missing this.’ He went into another room and studied while I cackled and watched that episode. And then another time, somebody gave him the John Grisham book, ‘The Client’. He said, ‘I’m going to save this for after finals.’ And I was like, ‘That’s crazy! I’m reading it right now.’ So, I read his book while he studied.”

They graduated together in the spring of 1994, launched their careers, and married the following February.

Tony started his career as an assistant district attorney in the Shawnee County District Attorney’s Office. After a year, he moved on to the Kansas Attorney General’s Office and in 1998 joined the United States Department of Justice, where he would remain for 22 years.

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— Mary Mattivi

Mary started her career as an assistant county attorney for Lyon County. After two years and the birth of the couple’s first child, Julia, she realized a lengthy commute would not work for their family and she began working as a defense attorney in Shawnee County District Court. From there she went on to be an assistant county attorney for Jackson County where she unsuccessfully ran for county attorney. Upon the birth of their second child, Matthew, she chose to return to Shawnee County where she served as assistant district attorney for eight years. During that time, the couple had their third child, Hope.

During this busy and often chaotic life of family and careers, a couple of unique opportunities arose. In 2007, while Tony was at the Department of Justice, he took a detail with the Regime Crimes Liaison Office. This detail took him to Baghdad for six months, to serve as an adviser to the Iraqi High Tribunal on several prominent war crimes cases against members of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

It was an experience that shaped the rest of his career, but Tony points to Mary as the key to his success in that detail.

“The credit really belongs more with Mary than it does with me because for six months I was 7,000 miles away and we had three little kids at home,” said Tony. “They were 3, 7, and 10 when I was gone. I had my hands full professionally, but she had her hands full at home and was working that entire time.”

After he returned from Iraq, the couple decided on another detail for Tony which would create a wonderful opportunity for the whole family, a move to Washington, D.C. They wanted their kids to expand their horizons and experience living in the capital for a year.

In 2008, Tony found what he was looking for. He was selected to lead the prosecution team against Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the alleged mastermind of the U.S.S. Cole attack.

“That [commission] came at the perfect time,” Mary said. “Our kids were in grade school. It was an easy move. And it just ended up being this really great experience where we got to see all of D.C. It was supposed to be for nine months to a year, and it ended up being two years.”

The family moved back to Topeka. Upon her return, Mary served as a pro tem judge in Topeka Municipal Court and in 2012 was appointed judge in the Shawnee County District Court where she serves to this day. Tony continued to serve as lead prosecutor on the Cole case until 2013. In 2015, he received the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Civilian Service in recognition of his work. He retired from the Department of Justice in 2020. However, retirement wasn’t the end for Tony. After he too had an unsuccessful political campaign for attorney general, he was appointed director of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation in January of 2023.

Even though their journey wasn’t always easy, they credit one another for having made it possible to keep their family a priority while pursuing their careers.

“We both understand the pressures,” Mary said. “We both recognize the time commitment it takes and how to form our life around that. I feel that’s a unique thing we’re able to do for each other.”

For the Mattivis, having the law in common set the stage for a unique adventure and a happy union.