



The Honorable Lee Johnson '80

Alumni

From the Army to the Kansas Supreme

Court, the Honorable Lee Johnson's professional career has taken many interesting turns.

Johnson attended the University of Kansas and received his B.S. in Business Administration in 1969. He then served in the Army Corp of Engineers from 1969 until 1971. After an honorable discharge from the Army, Johnson became a licensed agent and office manager of a multi-line independent insurance agency for six years until 1977. In addition to the insurance agency he also served as Mayor of Caldwell, Kan. from 1975 to 1976.

Johnson then thought about law school. After inquiring about different law schools, he found Washburn Law to be helpful and friendly and came away with the impression that, "they wanted me to apply at their school," said Johnson. "I always felt that Washburn appreciated its non-traditional students and understood the value of life experience," he said.

In January 1977 Johnson entered law school and graduated *summa cum laude* from Washburn University School of Law in May 1980. Because he graduated in 2 ½ years, Johnson limited his activities outside of classes and studying. He did, however, find time to write for the *Washburn Law Journal*. "Writing for the law journal had the obvious benefit of improving my research and writing skills," admitted Johnson. He is also quick to point out that he married his wife, Donna, during law school, and while he was focused on studying and getting through school, "she provided most of the household income during that time."

After graduation, Johnson began his career in Caldwell, Kan., practicing with Don B. Stallings. In 1987, Stallings retired and Johnson became a sole practitioner until April 2001. In addition to private practice, he also served as the Caldwell city attorney from 1987 to 1997 and city attorney for Argonia, Kan., from 1986 to 1991. In April 2001, Governor Bill Graves appointed Johnson to the Kansas Court of Appeals where he replaced The Honorable J. Patrick Brazil '62, who retired. In January 2007, Governor Kathleen Sebelius appointed Johnson to the bench of the Kansas Supreme Court.

"My journey has been a continual process of learning new things, most of which are interesting. As my father used to say, 'You can learn something new every day, if you're not careful,'" states Johnson.

Johnson had numerous mentors guide him along the way. "While in law school, I leaned most heavily on the advice and help of Professor Jim Concannon, and that support continues to the present. Entering the practice of law, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the attorneys and judges in Sumner County were most willing to help the new kid. In addition to my law partner, Don Stallings, I often sought the advice of Harold Pfalzgraf '62, Gerald Rogers and Marsh Doctor '66. When I came to the Court of Appeals, The Honorable David Knudson '66, took on the task of mentoring me, although others were quick to help also."

Johnson continues that cycle of mentoring. He has participated in the Washburn Law Mentor program for the past three years. "I give back to the law school to show appreciation for what I received as a student. Perhaps more importantly, I find that interacting with today's students is a rewarding and fun experience," said Johnson. He also participates in judging mock trial and trial advocacy competitions at the law school.

"I want to encourage students to do their best and realize that what they are doing today may impact the rest of their lives. Twenty-one years after graduating from Washburn Law, the nominating commission was very interested in what I had done in law school," stated Johnson.

When asked what is the most important aspect of being a judge, Johnson replied, "My first hurdle in transitioning from practice to the bench was to acquire a neutral mindset, suppressing the attorney's natural urge to be an advocate. Next, I had to accept that often the law would require me to decide a case in a manner that would yield a result that I personally did not like. Thus, the most important aspect of being a judge is to respect the law." Referring to his appointment to the Kansas Supreme Court, he continues, "I am excited about having the opportunity to participate in the decision making which could impact the bench and bar of Kansas for years to come."

Where does Johnson plan to go from here? He replied, "I want to stay where I am. Seven years ago, I would not have believed that I would be on the Kansas Supreme Court. I have been blessed and very lucky."