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Justice Noma Gurich: Mission Accomplished Madam Justice

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| BY JONELLA FRANK |

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED,

MADAM JUSTICE The newest member of the Oklahoma Supreme Court is a woman of varied interests and many talents who, upon being appointed, fulfilled a long-held personal aspiration.



It was in her first year of law school that Noma Gurich ('78) first thought of serving as a judge and, ultimately, on the Supreme Court. She credits "a lifetime of work and relationships" as the reason everything fell into place to allow her to be only the third woman in the history of the state to serve on the Supreme Court.

She was born in South Bend, Indiana, one of three children of John and Ramona Gurich. She grew up in a farming community southeast of South Bend, near Mishawaka. After graduating from Penn High School, Gurich attended Indiana State University. She excelled in school while participating in a variety of extracurricular activities, including basketball and marching, concert and jazz bands. She played clarinet for years and then taught herself how to play saxophone so she could land a spot in the jazz band.

Not until she was in college majoring in political science did she meet her first lawyer — Mr. Matthews — her political science instructor and adviser. When Gurich decided she wanted to go to law school, she consulted him. His recommendation was to choose a law school in a place where she would want to stay after graduation.

She considered law schools in the east, but did not pursue them. Instead, she thought of attending law school in Indiana or Illinois, but after visiting one of the campuses, decided she wanted something different. Gurich was familiar with Oklahoma because she and her family had visited her maternal grandmother and cousins who lived here for years. Those experiences as a visitor to the state caused her to believe that Oklahoma was a place she could stay. She applied to the University of Oklahoma College of Law, was accepted and in 1975 moved to Oklahoma to begin law school. And the native of the Hoosier State has been here ever since.

During her first year in law school, Gurich worked in the OU student government copy room, where she met many student leaders. It was through these contacts that she came to be appointed to the Student Superior Court. Her service on this court convinced her that she wanted to be a judge and, eventually, a justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

Gurich's other jobs during law school also helped her get to know Oklahoma and its people. She sold programs at OU football games and became a big fan of the team and Coach Barry Switzer. She worked in the legal division of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation and served as a student assistant for the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals and the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma, developing long-term relationships along the way.



Justice Yvonne Kauger administers the Oath of Office to Noma Gurich as Gurich's husband, John E. Miley, stands by her side.

Experiences as a visitor to the state caused Justice Noma Gurich to believe that Oklahoma was a place she could stay.



Many people know Gurich as a respected public servant, but there are interesting facts about our newest justice that are not commonly known.



Noma and John react to a speaker at the swearing-in ceremony.

John and Noma, with their nieces, Jessica and Melissa, are pictured in the Oklahoma Supreme Court Courtroom following the ceremony.

Upon graduation from the College of Law, Gurich entered private practice in Oklahoma City. For 10 years, her practice included cases dealing with negligence, products liability, anti-trust, securities fraud and workers' compensation.

In 1998, Gov. Henry Bellmon, for whom she'd worked as a campaign volunteer, appointed her to a six-year term on the Workers' Compensation Court. After six months on the court, Bellmon appointed her presiding judge, a position she held for four years.

Gurich was re-appointed to an additional six-year term by Gov. David Walters and served in that position until July 1998 when Gov. Frank Keating appointed her district judge in Oklahoma County to serve the remaining six months of the term of a retiring judge. Just days after her appointment, Gurich drew three opponents in the rapidly approaching primary election. She won the contested election. "All the right people came together for me," she said. Gurich was re-elected without opposition three times and served in that position until Gov. Brad Henry appointed her to the Oklahoma Supreme Court on January 7, 2011. On that day, Gurich told an Associated Press reporter, "I consider being a judge sort of a mission."

However, once again, her excitement about an appointment was tempered by the reality of circumstances beyond her control. There was a case pending before the Supreme Court that challenged the composition of the Judicial Nominating Commission and put into question any nominations it had made to the governor since the election in which state voters had passed a state question restructuring the commission. More than a month later, on February 15, the court rejected the claim and Gurich was sworn in during an informal ceremony that same day. Her formal swearing-in ceremony took place on March 31 in the Supreme Court Courtroom at the Oklahoma State Capitol.

Many people know Gurich as a respected public servant, but there are interesting facts about our newest justice that are not commonly known. For example, she is an experienced television camera operator and part of the team that produces a television broadcast of the Sunday morning worship service at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. This skill was developed as a result of her participation in her high school's Audio Visual Club. Her motivation to join the AV Club was due in part to her being told in sixth grade that girls couldn't run the reel-to-reel projectors when films were shown to elementary school children.

Also of interest, Gurich has made five trips to Russia. She studied Russian history in college, so when her church began a ministry in Russia in 1992, she was interested.



In the winter of 1993, she was part of the second mission trip and experienced what she called “Dr. Zhivago weather” upon arriving in Russia. “Being there was like a dream,” she said. “I felt like I was walking in Russian history.” She has lived in the homes of Russians hosts, some of whom had never before seen an American. Although she doesn’t speak Russian fluently and only “can say enough to surprise them,” she has developed relationships with people she came to know on her trips, maintaining contact with them, even attending weddings of young people she met. Photos of some of her Russian friends are proudly displayed in her office.

Another aspect of her life unknown to many is that she and her husband, John E. Miley (‘86), became legal guardians for her two nieces four years ago upon the death of their parents, Gurich’s sister and brother-in-law. The girls, 12 and 13 at the time, moved to Oklahoma from southern California to live with them. The young women are now in their junior and senior years in high school and both have turned out to be accomplished artists. Becoming parents of teenagers, “has been an education for John and I both,” she commented.

Looking back on her years in Oklahoma and the evolution of her professional career, Gurich referred to her journey as “a walk of faith.” From her law school classmates to the people she encountered in her various job and volunteer activities, Gurich connected with people who came to respect and support her as she climbed the ladder of public service. Four ingredients in her formula for success — treat people with respect, never make enemies, just be yourself and don’t give up, keep trying — are admirable habits that, if practiced universally, would make our world a much nicer place. | **SL** |

Members of the Oklahoma Supreme Court are (standing, left to right) Justice Douglas L. Combs, Justice James E. Edmondson, Justice John F. Reif, Justice Noma Gurich, (seated, left to right) Justice Joseph M. Watt, Vice Chief Justice Tom Colbert, Chief Justice Steven W. Taylor, Justice Yvonne Kauger and Justice James R. Winchester.

Photos by Legislative Service Bureau Photography