

The Law as a Bond

By Jonathan K. Frels – (June 14, 2017) – I am fortunate to have a father, Kelly Frels, who through his law practice has been deeply engaged both in the community and the evolution of public education in Texas. As a school lawyer at Bracewell & Patterson, my father’s practice addressed the types of hot-button topics and societal challenges that commonly play themselves out through rowdy public debate.

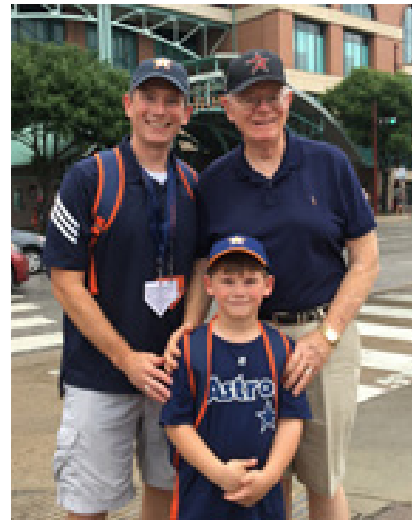


Throughout my childhood, I had a front row seat to debates on issues including the desegregation of schools, immigration, transgender restroom use and prayer in schools. The accessibility of and public discussion surrounding these legal issues meant that the law, and more specifically my father’s practice, formed a prism through which I grew up viewing the world and a connection between father and son.

One of our cherished family traditions was sitting down to nightly family dinners. These gatherings frequently involved lively debates on the legal issues my dad was facing in his practice and the political realities that surrounded them. Often, these very same issues were playing themselves out in real time at my school, which lent a different perspective to the discussions.

Mom often remarked that we should file briefs before dinner. Those evenings together form some of my fondest memories and engendered a love of public policy and debate. Through those family gatherings, I learned how to think rigorously and how to recognize the holes and blind spots in my arguments. The most important lesson, though, was one that my dad repeatedly emphasized. In order to learn how to be an effective advocate or policy maker, I had to learn how to “disagree without being disagreeable.”

Over the years, our shared interest in law and public policy led me to tag along to school board meetings in order to watch the legal and political debates unfold. I have vivid memories of sitting in the superintendent’s office at Houston Independent School District playing Oregon Trail on an Apple IIe, while my dad and Dr. Regan talked about desegregation and the development of the magnet school system.



Later, as a high school student, I remember attending a school board meeting to discuss the results of a school prayer decision that grew so heated my dad handed me the keys to the car >

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and asked me to pull it around back and keep it running so that he and his associate could make a quick exit. Throughout my childhood, the law provided a unique opportunity for me to get to know my dad and gain a better understanding of the world. Those times together taught me the



importance of learning where other people were coming from in addressing a problem, respecting those differences and working to find common ground. They are lessons I've been able to hone while practicing law with my dad over the last few years.

The lessons I've learned from my dad go far beyond the law, though. They center on the importance of being a devoted husband and father. My dad always made our family and interests a priority. No matter how busy he was with his practice, state and local bar commitments and other civic activities, he somehow found time to coach my baseball teams and my sister's softball teams and take me fishing. He even spent a semester transporting a truly horrendous basketball player to predawn practices when he knew there was absolutely no future in it. I cherished that time together, and it was a thrill to be able to share that with my son when my dad joined me as a tee ball coach this spring.

In many respects being a good father is about establishing connections with your children. For my father and me, the law has provided a wonderful bond.

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