

EXPOSING KIDS TO THE JUDICIARY

Emily Caughey

James Caughey

*Editor's Note: In May 2023, I ran across a delightful social media post. One of my friends from law school shared pictures of her kids interviewing justices on the Texas Supreme Court. She explained her kids had come up with a project to make a video for kids about the judiciary. Not only did they come up with the idea—they actually carried it out. I was intrigued by the project and asked her if she and her kids would put together an essay explaining the project for our readers. The following is the result. I offered the structure for the piece, and Emily (with some help from her parents) wrote this piece, which we at the Journal have lightly edited. We hope that you enjoy learning about the project and that it encourages more collaboration between kids and courts. You can see the video at: <https://tinyurl.com/EMC1234>*

I. THE PROJECT: INTERVIEWING  
TEXAS SUPREME COURT JUSTICES FOR KIDS

Our names are Emily and James Caughey, and we are 10 and 8 years old, respectively. We are in fifth and third grades, and beyond school and family and friends, we love gymnastics (Emily) and piano (James).

After my mom was a judge,<sup>1</sup> we observed that kids did not get enough exposure to the judiciary despite its important role in our government. We decided to try to change that.

We came up with a plan. What if we could interview Texas Supreme Court Justices on video, asking questions that kids would enjoy? If we could do this and share it with kids across Texas, we could teach kids about the judiciary. We could also show them that judges are normal people too. It is critical to know that even judges have families and like ice cream just like we do.

Once we had the idea, we dove in. Our first step was to write a letter to each member of the Texas Supreme Court, explaining our idea. We typed the letters and put them in the mail. Then we waited anxiously, not sure if they would respond. Fortunately, they wrote back.

Justice Jimmy Blacklock's assistant reached out to me (Emily) that same week. She responded enthusiastically that several justices would love to participate in the project. We exchanged emails about dates, and eventually a plan formed: James and I would travel to Austin in April 2023 and interview five Justices, all of whom agreed to participate and were available that day.

We were ecstatic. We not only had this idea, we were going to implement it. We could not wait to put the plan into action.

## II. THE PREPARATION

Once the date was set, we focused on the questions we planned to ask. We thought a lot about what might interest us and our friends, and how to strike the right balance. We decided we wanted a mix of serious questions that would teach kids, and fun questions that kids would find entertaining. We sat down at the dinner

---

1. Editor's note: In 2017, Texas Governor Greg Abbott appointed Emily and James's mom, Jennifer Caughey, to the First Court of Appeals in Texas. She served until December 2018, and is now running again to serve on that court.

table and worked together coming up with potential options. Then we revised and discussed with our parents, until we finished with this list of questions:

- What does the Texas Supreme Court do?
- What does a day in your life look like?
- What is different about being the Chief Justice?
- What is the best thing about being a judge?
- What's the hardest thing about being a judge?
- What's the difference between what you do and what your law clerks do?
- What do you do when you don't agree with your colleagues?
- How do you write a good opinion?
- What's your favorite opinion you've ever written?
- How long have you been judge? What was your path to get there?
- What is the most unexpected thing about being a Justice?
- How do you decide which way your opinion should go?
- What did you want to be when you were little?
- What has been the best day of your life?
- What's your favorite hobby outside of being a judge?
- What's your favorite fun fact about the Texas Supreme Court?
- What's your favorite part of being a judge?
- What's your favorite ice cream flavor?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
- If you were not a judge or lawyer, what would you be?
- What's your favorite place to travel?
- What's your favorite book?
- What's your favorite Taylor Swift song?

- If there was a movie about you, what actor would play you?
- Do you like working alone or in groups better?
- What's the most rewarding thing about being a judge?

We decided that we would rotate asking questions (Emily, then James), and we decided we would make sure each justice got a mix of half serious and half fun questions. We thought hard about who might be a good candidate for certain questions. We thought about which judges had young kids and how long they had served on the court, then assessed which questions seemed like the best fit for each of the justices.

There was one point we easily agreed on: we would end each interview with the question, what is your favorite ice cream flavor? Everyone had to have an answer to that one! We also decided that we would ask more questions than we would put in the final video, so we could pick which judge really engaged with certain questions and use those answers.

Next, we asked our parents to hire a videographer, so we did not just have a video from a phone. They kindly said yes. We also gave our teachers advanced notice that we would be missing a day of school.

The big day finally arrived. While we were driving to Austin, we practiced our questions and introduction over and over again in the car with our family. We were so excited, and we were nervous too.

### III. THE INTERVIEWS

We started with the Chief Justice, Nathan L. Hecht, and he so warmly welcomed us into his chambers. He spent a long time with us on the serious questions, explaining what the court does, his role, and how the judges work together. We learned a lot! We also really enjoyed learning about him. We learned that he loved to play piano and that he would want to fly if he could have any superpower. Most of all, we learned that he was a

really kind man who is generous with his time and cares about teaching kids.

Each of the other four justices were equally welcoming. Justice Blacklock told us about his daughters, and how if he could do anything, it would be to anticipate his girls' needs in life and solve them. What a great dad! Justice John Phillip Devine took the time to show us his sword collection. When we asked Justice Evan A. Young what he does when he does not agree with his colleagues, he joked with us that he stomped around, and then he told us a great message about how they work together. Justice Brett Busby excitedly told us about his path to the judiciary, his work for others, and his inspiration from his mom.

We learned two neat and surprising fun facts about the judiciary. First, we learned that Chief Justice Hecht has been on the court longer than all of the other justices combined. It is not surprising, then, that he had so much information to share with us. We also learned about a secret door in the courtroom, which opens to the judges robing room. If you ever go to the court, look out on the right side of the courtroom, and you may see it.

We also gathered all sorts of interesting information on the court. We learned about law clerks who help judges, and their role. We learned how the different judges write opinions and work to persuade each other. We learned about what their days look like, both when they have oral argument (where lawyers come and argue their cases) and when they do not. The justices also confirmed that they work hard to get it right, and one of the hardest things about being a judge is that they may not like the way an opinion has to go, but they have to be true to the law.

We left overwhelmed with gratitude. Each justice devoted real time to answering our questions. They were gracious and kind, and we learned more in a day than we could have in weeks of lessons. Best of all, we had the video and could get to work on sharing it with kids across the state.

#### IV. THE AFTERMATH

Video editing turned out to be a lesson in itself. We went back and forth with the videographer, over and over with parts to cut and changes we wanted her to make. But after all the hard work, we had a final product by the end of the summer. We were ready to share it.

Next, we began researching schools so we could share the video with students. We looked for history teachers, department heads, and anyone who might be interested. We emailed the link out, and we were shocked by the kind and grateful responses we received. For example, one school's administrator wrote that our project would be a "resource in the classroom." Another school's administrator remarked that the video is a "fantastic way to bring social studies alive for young people." One more wrote that we were "demonstrating real leadership and responsibility by taking on such a big topic, and asserting yourself to reach out to us."

We also had our parents post the video online, and we are told that the project has reached thousands of people. We hope that kids (or adults) will watch it and see the respect these justices brought into the interviews we planned. We hope the insights into the justices as people, as well as to their work, will leave kids with a better sense of who supreme court justices are and what they do. We also hope this will inspire other kids to send letters and ask to meet with inspiring people, like government officials or people they admire. You never know, they might well write back and agree to meet. If they do, you will remember it forever.