

Distinguished Alumni

SC Justice Urbigkit strives to protect individual rights

Walter Urbigkit, BA '49, LLB '51, has a major goal in mind in carrying out his duties as Wyoming Supreme Court chief justice — protecting an individual's rights from abuse.

"For me, the challenge of the law is the responsibility to try to maintain the sanctity and sacredness of the Constitution," he says. In doing so, Urbigkit and his colleagues face an increasing challenge. "We have to support and sustain law enforcement, but cannot in that effort dispossess constitutional protections."

"In the past seven years in law, there has been an unbelievable regression in the Bill of Rights protection of individuals and the sanctity of the home." Still, Urbigkit strives to do his part to uphold the law of the land and to protect individual rights, even when his efforts are unpopular.

One such case occurred this summer, when he filed an 89-page dissent in the Wyoming Supreme Court's affirmation of a conviction of Rock Spring man on conspiracy to commit kidnapping. The Supreme Court overturned an earlier rape and kidnapping conviction in this case, but it affirmed the later conspiracy conviction. Urbigkit based his dissent on what he considered violations of the individual's rights. It wasn't a popular move, but he felt the integrity of the judicial process was at stake.

Urbigkit acknowledges that each opinion he issues will help shape society in years to come.

"This is an architectural responsibility of trying to build a better society, to try to create a status within the law that will improve the state," Urbigkit says, calling his judicial duties a "constructural challenge."

His 1985 appointment to the Wyoming Supreme Court consummated a long-time dream for Urbigkit, who says that, "from a very early age, I had an interest in the judiciary." From his childhood in Crowheart, Wyo., he held onto the dream of becoming an attorney and — ultimately — a judge.

UW the Natural Choice

Urbigkit says attending UW on his way to a legal career was an easy decision to make, and he made the most of the opportunities he had here. Once on campus, Urbigkit studied political science and economics and excelled in the classroom. He graduated with honors.

Urbigkit competed on the UW debate team for three years. His mentor was Wilbur Stephens, a "blythe and unusual individual" who challenged his under-



lings to be thoughtful, forthright activists.

Founder of the UW Independent Students Association, Urbigkit was also a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi and Delta Sigma Rho. Because he was very poor, these extracurricular activities were the only real opportunity he had to travel and to learn more about the world.

One incident in 1947 brought Urbigkit a certain degree of notoriety, and nearly had him kicked out of school. Urbigkit and some friends published an underground publication called "Common Sense," in which they questioned the trustees' orders to review books for subversive material. The probe, a response to the hysteria created by Sen. Joseph McCarthy's investigations into suspected communists, didn't spark any censorship, but it did stir up emotions on campus.

Law school went well for Urbigkit, who graduated first in his class in 1951. During 1950-51, he served as student body president (the first non-greek that anyone could remember) and editor-in-chief of the Wyoming Law Journal. Urbigkit devoted as many as 110 hours of study per week during his first year, but successive terms became easier. In law school, he developed many fond friendships that lasted long after commencement.

Some of his classmates who remained close friends within the law practice in this state were Bill Jones, Harry Leimback, Harry Harris, Vince Ross, Bob Winter, Paul T. Lianos, Thomas Whitley, Cecil Hughes, Bob Costin and Henry T. Jones. (Hughes, Costin and

Henry Jones are now deceased.)

Life as a Lawyer

After graduation and two years in the United States Infantry, Urbigkit fulfilled his lifelong dream and became a trial lawyer — he even founded the Wyoming Trial Lawyers Association. In private practice, Urbigkit took on all types of cases, developing a strong business law caseload. He also took several criminal defense cases and frequently represented plaintiffs in damage claims.

But trial work was Urbigkit's first love. He thrived on the challenge and the dynamic nature of that field.

"A good trial lawyer is really a gunslinger," Urbigkit says. "You have a client walk in the door, and he'll have a problem about which you know absolutely nothing. But if it's a significant case, by the time you're finished with it, you're going to have to know more than the experts do." This line of work requires a "studious capacity" and plenty of hard work.

A Legislative Leader

Over the years, Urbigkit has demonstrated a devotion to public service. That included two terms on the Laramie County Welfare Board (one as chairman), nine years on the Laramie County School District 1 Board (two years as chairman), 10 years on the Wyoming State Selective Service Appeal Board (four years as chairman), and two years on the Laramie County Planning



Walter Urbigkit's career includes many years of public service, both as a Wyoming Supreme Court justice and as a legislator from Laramie County.

Commission. However, he may be best known for his 12 years in the Wyoming House of Representatives.

Urbigkit had been active in state politics for several years when he decided in 1972 to run for the Wyoming House. With a lot of legwork of his own, and from his wife, Marian, Urbigkit finished near the top in Laramie County balloting that year.

Increasing the permanent funds available from severance taxes and modernization of Wyoming's criminal law ranked high on Urbigkit's priority list early on. He also advocated strong support for UW and the Wyoming bar.

As a member of the minority (Democratic) party, Urbigkit faced some rough waters. The slowness, stratification and ceremonial nature of the legislative process frustrated him, but he learned to work within that system.

The period in which he served saw many historic battles. For example, Urbigkit and his colleagues debated severance taxes, legalized abortion and a four-year college in Casper. He saw the defeat of a medical school at the university and the establishment of the Cheyenne and Casper Family Practice Residency Programs.

Any reasonable proposal could earn bipartisan support, according to Urbigkit. In fact, he says the failure to approve a medical school was the only time in his 12 years that a joint group did not succeed. A legislator could not afford to make permanent enemies, because he or she might need their support tomorrow, according to

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Urbigkit. Cooperation was critical.

Still, a minority party member in the House faced plenty of frustration.

"It's a cold-blooded business," he says of political life. Many times, it became a matter of who could kill bills faster than the others. Urbigkit, one-time minority House leader, took on an "enforcer" role within capitol politics. He also devel-

oped a reputation as an adept legislator who could hold his own against even the most worthy opponents.

Colleagues recognized his abilities. In 1973, they named him most effective orator; and in 1983, they chose him as the most effective legislator in the House.

Urbigkit enjoyed his years in the Legislature; but when he exited the House floor for the last time, he closed

that chapter of his life. With the exception of committee appearances in connection with his Supreme Court duties, he has never been back.

"When you leave, you leave," Urbigkit says.

Urbigkit and his wife, Marian (Chilton), have four children: Marcia (35), Cynthia (34), Robert (33) and Brenda (30).

Over the years, he has been active in several organizations, including:

American Bar Association, Tenth Circuit Bar Association, Laramie County Bar Association, American Board of Trial Advocates, First Presbyterian Church, American Legion, Young Men's Literary Club, American Association of Retired Persons, Wyoming Heritage Society, Cowboy Joe Club and Cheyenne Quarterback Club. He was a member of several other organizations, that he had to resign when he accepted the Supreme Court appointment.