



The Search

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Letter to my Baby-School self

By Bill Wirskye

First Assistant Criminal District Attorney in Collin County

Editor's note: He is now the First Assistant Criminal District Attorney in Collin County, but over his nearly 25-year career as an attorney, Bill Wirskye has also worked as a prosecutor and as a criminal defense attorney in Dallas County. He's a sought-after speaker and presenter for TDCAA and other entities because his knowledge and experience on both sides of the bar give him a perspective that most attorneys practicing criminal law simply don't have. This column, which debuts with this issue of the journal, will feature Bill's take on whatever topic might interest him at the moment—and believe us that while you might not see things as he does, he will always, always make you think.

Dear 1994 Self,

Hi Bill, it's your future self writing to you from the year 2017. The reason for this letter is that you've been on my mind a lot this week.

Right now I'm serving as a Faculty Advisor at TDCAA's July 2017 Baby School, and I'm feeling strangely sentimental about you. When I first saw the earnest and eager young faces of the new prosecutors at my table, I swear I saw you staring back at me. Between seeing that youthful image of you, recalling all my treasured memories of "our" Baby School experience, and downing a few adult beverages, I decided to put pen to paper and give you some advice. I

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want to share with you the many lessons I've learned from this noble profession and the people who do this difficult job the right way, every day.

First, let's get a few things out of the way. Your hair will fall out in your 30s so enjoy it now. Your metabolism will slow down in your 40s so watch what you eat. The Texas Rangers still haven't won a World Series. And O.J. Simpson will be found "not guilty" of the murders he just committed. (And it's a long story.)

Despite all this, though, you turn out OK. You have a great family and a few close friends. You work for a great elected DA, but in a different county from where you started. You will try some big cases. You will be a defense lawyer for a while, and you will love it—but not quite as much as being a Texas prosecutor, so you will return to prosecution. All things considered, everything turns out all right, but not quite in the way you have planned. And it won't be without some heartache and pain, most of which will be your own doing.

The fundamentals come first. Be honest. This job is far too important to be anything less than 100-percent honest. You will spend a career earning your reputation as an honest and trustworthy prosecutor. No case is worth more than your integrity. Be nice to everyone. A law license is not a license to mistreat people. Treat people the right way on the way up, because you will see them again on your way down. And they will help you get back up again.

Always keep an open mind. Never become too rigid in your views. Never become cynical. Never view this job as "us versus them." And while you keep your mind open, keep your heart open as well. There are so many ways to help people in this job, and I don't want you to miss one of those opportunities because you are hardheaded or hardhearted.

You're going to need to learn how to be a good teammate, and this will not be easy for you. Don't gossip—it's toxic to both you and your team. Honor those who are not present. Learn that a team is only as strong as its weakest member. Never look down on a teammate unless you are looking down to offer a hand up. Pay it forward. Soon you won't be the newest guy in the office, so help those who come behind you just as you were helped by those who came before. The people you are meeting now will become lifelong friends, so be forgiving of their faults. As you move forward in your career, you will need good friends. These friends will help you celebrate victories, but more importantly, they will commiserate with you in defeat. You won't learn exactly how important good teammates and friends are until much later in your career when you will fail at an impossible task in a very public way. Your friends and former teammates will step up for you in a big, big way.

Let's talk about anger. You will spend your early years getting angry. Angry at defense lawyers, judges, cops, witnesses, coworkers, and even yourself. There will be times your anger will consume you. But as you get older you will realize that you don't have to fight every fight.

You will realize that your anger almost always leads to self-pity, and you're a better person than one who feels sorry for himself. You will realize what a colossal waste of time and energy anger is, and you will slowly grow into a gracious and happy warrior. But promise me that if you ever stop being that joyful warrior—gracious both in victory and in defeat—do everyone a favor and leave the profession.

Next, let's visit about your ego. You will shortly come to believe that you have it all figured out. You don't. And you will learn that lesson the hard way. After about five more years in the business, you will again think that you have it all figured out and that you're God's gift to prosecution. You don't and you aren't. And you'll learn that the hard (and embarrassing) way. You'll realize that you will never have it all figured out—this job is too complex and you're just not that smart. No one is. If after all this, you ever start to think you're "all that" or that you have finally figured it all out, do everyone a favor and leave the profession.

And for a young man with such a healthy ego, you will be surprised just how much time you will spend being afraid. Terrified, actually. I know, it sounds weird—how does the guy who thinks he knows so much spend all that time being afraid? I'm sorry, I can't explain it. I just know you will be scared, and that will never change. And oftentimes it will be that type of fear that almost paralyzes you. You will learn to push through that fear and get the job done, but the fear will never leave. You will learn to welcome that fear, and you will start the long process of harnessing your fear to fuel a sense of dedication to grind at properly preparing a case. If you ever lose this fear—that awesome fear of trying to do justice—do everyone a favor and leave the profession.

You will make mistakes. You'll make lots of them. And no matter how long you do this job, you will never stop making mistakes. So let me tell you a few things about mistakes. Don't fear making them so long as they are not mistakes borne of dishonesty or laziness. Just try not to repeat the same mistakes. New mistakes are good—they are a sign you are making progress, a sign of growth, a sign that you are pushing yourself to do new things. But always remember: Own your mistakes, and own them immediately. Make no excuses for them, especially when the excuses are true. Learn from them, and then move on. But promise me that if you ever stop making mistakes or start making excuses for them, you'll do everyone a favor and leave the profession.

As I've mentioned already, you will actually move on at some point and leave prosecution. Even though it was probably long overdue (for all the reasons I told you to leave the field that I've listed already), you won't have the courage to do it on your own. It will take an election that didn't turn out as you had hoped to make you take that leap into private practice. While it will be fulfilling work, the idea of once again working as a prosecutor will never quite leave

your mind.

Years later, you will be given that rare second chance. This time though, instead of just prosecuting big cases, you will relish sharing lessons you've learned with others. You will try to atone for past mistakes by being an FA at Baby School and writing letters like this. And you will savor it all with a special intensity, because you will be one of those lucky few who get a do-over in life. It all turns out OK.

So congratulations on making it through Baby School 1994 and starting your career as a prosecutor. I've never once regretted the decision you just made to join the ranks of Texas prosecutors, so welcome to the profession, and buckle up for a wild ride.

Sincerely,
2017 Bill