



**Judge Julie Kocurek**

Judge Julie Kocurek has served as a Criminal District Judge since her appointment by Governor George Bush on October 1, 1999. She served as the Presiding Judge of the Criminal Courts of Travis County for 4 years. She is on the Juvenile Board for Travis County, has served as the District Court Community Liaison for Mental Health Issues and is a former President of the Texas District Judge's Association. She developed and served as co-chair of The Austin/Travis County Do the Write Thing for 13 years. The Do the Write Thing Campaign focuses on teaching young adults how to resolve conflict without resorting to violence.

Before her service as a District Judge, Kocurek was a Travis County Assistant District Attorney assigned to the Child Abuse, Juvenile Justice and General Crimes Division. She earned her Doctor of Jurisprudence from St. Mary's School of Law in 1990 and her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas in 1987

Judge Kocurek is Board Certified in Criminal Law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. She has served as Chair, Vice-Chairman and Treasurer of the Criminal Law Section of the Travis County Bar Association. She has also served on the Travis County Mental Health Project.

Most importantly, Julie Kocurek is a wife and mother of two teenagers.

**TRANSCRIPT: UT Economics Commencement Speech**  
**The Honorable Julie Kocurek | Saturday, May 20, 2017**

**SWIMMING UPSTREAM AND OTHER LESSONS LEARNED**

Honorable Members of the Faculty, Graduates, Proud Parents, Family and Friends: Congratulations! This is a day that you have worked towards for years, so ENJOY!

When Professor Abrevaya invited me to be the commencement speaker for today, he reminded me that my husband and I both graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in Economics. Then he kindly pointed out that it has been 30 years since I was standing in your shoes. Ouch that hurt...Has it really been 30 years? It seems like yesterday that I was at UT. It was at a time when there was no internet, no e-mails, cell phones (which were rare and the size of bricks), and a lot of big, puffy 80's hair.

As my mind went back to my days on campus, I recalled a meeting I had with one of my economic professors during my junior year. I wasn't doing so well in this particular class, so I went to talk to the professor. During our meeting, the professor said to me, "Young lady, you are a fish swimming upstream. This major is not for you."

**Well, many times during my professional career and my life, I have felt like a fish swimming upstream... and at times, you will, too.**

Austin and The University of Texas have changed a lot since I was that fish swimming upstream on the 40 Acres, but in my mind, many of the basic principles of leading a successful, satisfying life are the same.

**So as you start your first job or head to graduate school, I want to share some things that I wish I would have known 30 years ago...**

**BELIEVE IN YOURSELF**

You are graduating from a highly respected university with a degree in economics. This is an accomplishment to be proud of. Your degree gives you a broad foundation to succeed. While obtaining your degree, you have learned how to think analytically and have enhanced your ability to recognize and solve problems.

These skills can be applied to any career that you choose. AND employers are looking for people who can think analytically and who can solve problems.

So, as you step into your first job or begin graduate school, recognize that you have already acquired the tools to succeed. Apply what you have learned here and believe in yourself and your instincts.

### **THERE IS NO ROADMAP FOR YOUR FUTURE**

Up to this point, you knew the path you were supposed to take...elementary school, middle school, high school, and then college. You are now entering the most uncertain and exciting time of your life. YOU are in charge of creating your path to your own professional success.

Set goals for where you want to be in your career in 5 years, 10 years, and beyond. But understand that there is no direct path to reach those goals. So be flexible and realize that there will be unexpected opportunities that arise along the way. And know that you will likely reach your goals on a path that is far different than the one you envision today. Most importantly, make sure your path is paved with the love of family and friends.

### **BUILD YOUR OWN BRAND**

By “build your own brand,” I mean, establish your principles. What kind of person are you going to be known as in the business or professional world or in the community at large?

Yes, you have been building your own brand your entire life. However, since education is mostly an individual endeavor, the people you interact with in the business or professional world may not know much about you.

Are you going to be a team player or a lone wolf? Are you going to be known as a straight shooter or someone else? Your reputation will follow you everywhere you go. You now have an opportunity to build or re-establish your brand or reputation.

To me, it’s important to:

- a. Be ethical
- b. Be honest
- c. Treat everyone with respect
- d. Always do the right thing

These may seem obvious because they are. Unfortunately, many people these days choose a different approach. However, these are the principles that I chose to be my brand. Every day I must decide whether people go to prison or remain in the free world. Every day, I determine whether people’s constitutional rights have been upheld. These guideposts have always served me well in making these tough decisions. In whatever job you choose, these are the kinds of principles that will serve you well.

### **DO WHAT YOU LOVE**

During your life, you will spend more time at work than any other place. So you need to do something that you enjoy. While I was in law school, I found my passion – criminal law.

This was an area of the law that I enjoyed and excelled in. However, my first job was with a civil law firm. I took that job because the pay was good, but I found it boring and un-motivating. I quickly learned the importance of doing what you love.

As a result, I left the law firm to practice criminal law at the District Attorney's office. My paycheck was much smaller, but I was happy and fulfilled because I felt like I was making a difference in the world.

### **SET GOALS FOR YOURSELF**

When I got to the District Attorney's office, I set goals for myself. For example, I tried 10 jury trials per year and I volunteered for any extra community outreach assignments that were available. I decided early on that my long-term goal was to become a Criminal District Judge.

Then, in 1999, I learned that a new district court was going to be created and the governor was going to appoint the new judge. I hesitated to apply because...

- I was younger than any of the judges.
- A woman had never served on the Criminal District bench.
- I was expecting my first child, which turned out to be twins.

But I decided to step out of my comfort zone and apply. And on October 1, 1999, I was sworn in as Criminal District Judge. You never know where an Economics degree may lead you!

And finally...

### **FACE YOUR CHALLENGES WITH RESOLVE**

All of us have and will continue to face challenges throughout our lives. We can anticipate some of those challenges, but many of them are unexpected. Right when you think you have everything under control, life throws you curve balls. I received one of those major curve balls 18 months ago. It turned out to be the biggest challenge I have faced during my life.

In November of 2015, my 15-year old son was driving me home from the Austin High football game. As he drove into the driveway, we noticed that a trash bag was blocking the security gate. My son got out of the car to move the bag. While he was doing so, a masked gunman ran up to our car and from about 4 feet away, fired 4 shots into the car where I was seated. A wall of bullet fragments and metal slammed into my head, face, arm and shoulder. I remember thinking, "I am being killed in front of my own son. This is how my life is going to end." It is a complete miracle that I survived this attack. My son's heroic actions and divine intervention are the reasons that I stand here today.

As you can imagine, the days, weeks, and months that followed were the most difficult times of my life. I remember waking up and realizing this was not a nightmare, it was real, it was my life... and my life had literally been blown to pieces. My body, my mind, our family's sense of security, our home, and my work had been shattered in an instant.

I felt as though I was in a deep, dark hole and I did not know if I would ever be able to get out. But I was not alone in that hole, my faith, my family, and the community pulled me out. I remember my husband telling me to take life one day at a time and that is what I did.

As I laid in the ICU, I questioned why I had chosen this line of work...coming face to face with high-risk people every day? I could have retired and I thought about doing so. I actually wondered why at 51, I was still that fish swimming upstream? But I soon realized that this was bigger than me. I realized that I needed to return to the bench to show that justice would prevail in the face of evil.

So despite being in the hospital for 40 days and undergoing 26 surgeries, losing my index finger, and having very little feeling in my left arm, I climbed back onto the bench and resumed the work that I had found to be my passion. Currently, 3 men are under federal indictment for my attempted assassination. One of those men was a defendant who had a case pending before me. My family and I are still in the process of healing... and it gets better every day.

I obviously hope that the challenges that lie ahead for you are nothing even remotely this horrific. But, I tell you this story because it shows that our human spirit is resilient and strong... mine is and yours is too.

I have come to understand and believe that we, as human beings, are capable of enduring more than we can imagine. We can endure as long as we adhere to the principles that we have decided to guide our life. And as long as we remain flexible...nothing can break us, no matter the adversity.

So WHEN, not if, but WHEN you are faced with a challenge or hardship that may seem insurmountable and that stream is flowing too fast for you to continue to swim, face it with strength, courage, resolve and determination. Understand that you have the ability to overcome it. Realize that you can choose how to define the hardship. But, never let the hardship define you and never let the hardship compromise your principles or defeat you.

Thank you all for the opportunity to be here today. It is truly an honor to be standing before this future generation of leaders. I wish each of you the best as you create your own roadmap to a successful and meaningful life.

And always remember "Hook 'em Horns!"