Branching Out: Utah Supreme Court visits USU

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The Utah Supreme Court conducted an entire court session at USU's Logan campus March 19. Michael Petersen, USU Tooele lecturer in political science, came to the event to see his daughter, Paige Petersen, in her new role on the court. At left is Paige Petersen's cousin and CHaSS student Tanner Petersen.

Utah Supreme Court's visit to Logan campus allows USU Tooele lecturer to see his daughter, the newest justice, at work

Theory is all well and good. Reality, however, can be a different beast all together.

For Michael Petersen, theory first crashed into reality when, as a struggling young Political Science professor, he managed the campaign for Democrat Victoria Shapard, who in that 1978 Congressional race in Georgia lost to Newt Gingrich. Gingrich made his entrance into Washington, D.C., and in 1994 introduced the Contract with America, the blueprint for the Republican-held Congress. America would never be the same again.

“I've thought a lot about that,” Petersen says now.

Petersen was in the audience March 19 for another, happier type of theory vs. reality history making: The Utah Supreme Court conducted an actual appeals court session on the Utah State University campus.

For Petersen, a lecturer in Political Science at USU Tooele, the satisfaction was not in the Supreme Court’s first-ever visit to Logan, but in the introduction of his daughter, Paige Petersen, as the newest justice on the Utah Supreme Court.

Paige Petersen was sworn in as a justice in early January – filling the seat left by retiring Chief Justice Christine Durham.

Not only was this his first chance to observe his daughter on the bench, it was the first time he'd ever sat in the audience for any higher court hearing.

His reaction? “I loved it,” he said. “I've been a political scientist for a long time,” he said, “and I've never seen a Supreme Court argument before.”

Two appeals were argued before the court, presenting a “thoroughly educational experience for students, faculty, and staff who may be unfamiliar with just how the actual world of litigation works,” said Anthony Peacock, department head of Political Science.

“What’s particularly valuable about the justices’ willingness to sit and hear appeals at USU is that it gave students and others the opportunity to see two real lawsuits being argued,” he said.

Petersen, a native of Castle Dale, Utah, completed his graduate work at Ohio State University and taught for about eight years at Georgia’s Clayton State University. Paige, the oldest of three children, was born while her dad was working on his doctoral dissertation at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

An offer to teach at the then-College of Eastern Utah in Price – now USU Eastern – brought the young family back to eastern Utah. Paige went on to graduate from CEU before heading off to Yale University for her law degree.

Michael Petersen’s career at CEU included service as the college’s president from 1985 to 1996. He left CEU to serve as associate commissioner of the Utah System of Higher Education, and in 2001 he was named as the executive director of the Utah Education Network (UEN). Under his leadership, UEN began its mission of interactive video conferencing that connected public schools statewide – a service that has facilitated USU’s ability to offer classes at its 33 regional campuses and centers.

A teacher at heart, though, Peterson returned to the classroom in 2012 to teach political-science classes at USU’s Tooele campus.

CEU became part of the USU family in 2010 with its transition to USU Eastern. So, while Paige Petersen’s pre-2010 associate’s degree says CEU, the Department of Political Science has laid claim. “She’s officially an Aggie,” says Peacock.

Paige Petersen brings to Utah’s highest court a diversity of unique experience, including eight years as a federal
prosecutor in The Hague, Netherlands, followed by three years on the United National Yugoslavian War Crimes Tribunal.

“Paige has experience that none of the other justices have. I think it helps to have the perspective she brings out,” said Michael Petersen.

The Utah Supreme Court’s visit to Logan was hopefully the beginning of a tradition for USU, said Peacock. The justices regularly travel for court sessions to the University of Utah and Brigham Young University, which both have law schools and mock court rooms. At USU, the justices heard testimony from a makeshift bench on the stage of the Russell/Wanlass Performance Hall.

“To me, the thing that was so great about today is that the students got a live demonstration of one of the important parts of the Supreme Court role,” said Michael Petersen.

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