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Violin Man

A Houston judge serenades the city.

INTERVIEW BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

As the carefree years of youth transition to the busy decades of adulthood, many of us leave behind once-loved hobbies and pastimes as distant memories of the people we used to be. This easily could have been the case for Brett Busby if it weren't for a kind invitation from a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Growing up in Amarillo and Austin, Busby learned to play the violin by ear at age three. He was in orchestra throughout middle and high school, competed in state solo competitions, and played in the symphony at Duke University for a couple of years. But toward the end of undergraduate school and throughout law school at Columbia University, Busby didn't have enough hours in the day to keep up with the instrument.

A few years later, Busby found himself with the highly coveted position of law clerk for the U.S. Supreme Court. One day, now-retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor welcomed him to bring his violin to a dress rehearsal for a musical birthday party she had planned for her husband. Busby hadn't played in several years, so that night he went home to "knock some of the rust off" for about three hours. At the rehearsal the next day, he met one of the justice's friends who had a Stradivarius and Guarneri del Gesù, which the friend invited Busby to try out.

Brett Busby (center) plays violin with the Houston Civic Symphony.

"Thanks to Justice O'Connor," Busby said, "I had the opportunity to play two of the finest violins in the world. And I was inspired to get back to playing my violin regularly."

Now Busby is himself a justice, on the 14th Court of Appeals in Houston. When he's not judging, he plays violin in the Houston Civic Symphony, which rehearses once a week and holds five concerts a year. Busby also is chair of Artistic & Orchestra Affairs of the Houston Symphony Society Board of Trustees, a position that has recently involved hiring the symphony's new music director, offering input on programming, and promoting outreach with "community embedded" musicians who perform at area schools. "It's a program that I'm really excited about because that's how I got interested in music," Busby said. "It's great to be able to offer that opportunity to a new generation."

What do you enjoy most about playing violin, and why is it important to you that you continue to be involved with music?

Music has been a part of my life for so long that playing is a familiar joy, and completely immersing myself in something different from work or parenting for a while is a great way to recharge. In addition, orchestral playing—like appellate judging—is not something one can do alone; you have to collaborate to be successful. I also enjoy practicing at home, which lets me share the music with my family.

Why did you choose not to pursue a music degree?

Even if I had the talent to become a professional soloist, it is a career that involves a tremendous amount of travel. Although I enjoy traveling, I also enjoy having a place to call home most of the time. Additionally, I became interested in public policy while at Duke and was eager to pursue that field of study.

You started with violin so young. Were your parents musical?

My mother played piano and flute when she was growing up, and she and my father took me to children's concerts with the Amarillo Symphony. After going a couple of times, I pointed to the violins and said, "I want to learn to play that!" My parents responded that they thought I was a little too young to start, but they agreed to look for a teacher. Amazingly, they found an instructor in Amarillo, Texas, who had gone to Japan to study with Shinichi Suzuki and learned his method for teaching young children to play violin by ear.

How do you think playing at such a young age and throughout your childhood has affected you?

Learning to play by ear is great training for any auditory learn-

ing, and it is particularly helpful for an appellate advocate or judge, who must listen carefully and respond quickly in oral argument. Also, even to this day, it's easier for me to play something that I've heard rather than to just sight-read it off the page, although I can do both.

When performing with the symphony, what is going through your mind? I am focused completely on bringing the music to life as best I can and fitting my part together with those playing around me. I am also remembering what is coming next and how my part will lead or support that section of the music.

What is your favorite piece or program to play?

This is a hard question to answer because I find that after investing the time and effort to learn a piece thoroughly, I usually enjoy playing it. Thinking back over past programs, some pieces that stand out as particular favorites include Beethoven's Seventh and Ninth symphonies, Brahms's Tragic Overture and German Requiem, Dvorak's New World Symphony, and Saint-Saëns's Organ Symphony.

What are the differences between a civic symphony and a professional symphony?

With the professional symphony, the musicians are paid to perform and have trained in music school, and their playing is of very high

quality. Although all the folks in our orchestra are really talented, performing music is not what they do all day. They're not being paid to spend hours every week preparing for our concerts. We enjoy making the music ourselves and sharing it with other people, so it's something we make the time to do.

Why is the Houston Symphony's initiative to introduce classical music to kids important?

Listening to music is a great thing for children to do, but it is hard to get a feel for what it would be like to play a particular instrument unless you see the musician playing that instrument while also hearing the sound he or she produces. The Houston Symphony's programs also give many children the chance to meet musicians and hear them talk about their instruments and their work, and this personal interaction is a very effective way to get children interested in exploring music.

You're a Texan—any thoughts on that thing they call a fiddle? Have you ever played any country, folk, or bluegrass?

Yes, I have tried a few fiddle pieces over the years. My favorite is *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, which I performed with a band in high school and in law school. I hope to have the opportunity to play it again! **TBJ**



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Justice Brett Busby