Throughout most of my three decades as a public defender, few of my peers became judges. It was not that they did not aspire to the bench, but rather because public defense was viewed as a less serious resume item than prosecution or litigation at a silk-stocking firm. During my early Harris County practice, in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the only guaranteed route to a criminal judgeship was through the district attorney’s office. Later, in President Obama’s early tenure, some of my fellow federal public defenders were confirmed to federal benches, before the opposition party shut that down.

Recently, the tables have turned. President Biden has already successfully placed many former public defenders in lifetime judgeships. More surprising are the changes among elected state judges. When the office opened in late 2010, most of the 16 misdemeanor judges and 22 felony judges were ex-prosecutors. None had been public defenders, if for no other reason than Harris County had no public defender office before.

Today, public defenders frequently become judges in Harris County. Many were previously our co-workers in this office. Two were elected as justices on courts of appeal. Two were elected as criminal district judges and one as a juvenile district judge. Two (and soon three), will sit on the county criminal courts at law. A fourth misdemeanor judge was previously a public defender in Travis County. Two other lawyers from the office became criminal law hearing officers. Three more are seeking elected benches this year.

The path runs both ways. Three lawyers in the office now were previously judicial officers. It seems a long way from the time that becoming a public defender – however noble – was not viewed as a prestigious job. It was not a firm rung on the career ladder. While there is no way to predict how all ex-public defenders will perform as judges, it is good to know they had the experience of listening to clients in confidence and feeling the responsibility of speaking for them.

Preparing lawyers to be judges is one measure of success. Another is how clients remember their lawyers. Yesterday, at the Sheriff’s invitation, Bishop James Dixon and I toured the veterans’ pod at the Joint Processing Center. These men are charged with everything from state jail felonies to capital murder. They are linked only by their previous military service, but it is a strong bond that makes for more peace and cooperation than anywhere else in the jail.

It was with some trepidation that I introduced myself to about 100 imprisoned men. They were not only polite, but welcoming. At one point, a man stood and complimented our office. When I met individually with some, they praised PDO lawyers and staff by name. Virtually all their complaints were about private lawyers, even some retained.

It is great to have our lawyers go on to other prestigious positions. However, nothing is more satisfying than having clients speak of our virtues. Thank you for all you do and have done. Happy New Year.
Cynthia Patterson’s Petie

This is my 13 year old Shih Tzu. His name is Petie. My daughter gave him to me when he was 4 months old. She got him from a couple who was unable to properly care for him because their older dog had serious health issues that required all of their time. Petie’s favorite things are treats, going for walks and chasing squirrels in the backyard. He is a very sweet, loving little dog.
This week will be Jason Sosa’s last week with the Harris County Public Defender’s Office. He begins his new job as Concho County’s First Felony Trial Division Chief on January 10th. While speaking with Jason after he made his decision to accept the job, he said it was a decision that he did not make lightly, but it was the right decision for him and his new family. Jason married Natalee Rodriguez last month and became a father to her twin daughters. Although they were prepared to move to Houston to start their new lives together, fate intervened when Jason received an offer to help start a new Public Defenders Office in the Concho Valley. During Sosa’s interview with our office Mark Hochglaube, the Chief of the Felony Trial Division at the time, asked Sosa where he saw himself in 5 years. Without batting an eye, Sosa said “in your position as Chief of the Felony Trial Division.” Here we are over 6 ½ years later and Sosa made it happen.

Jason began his years at our office as an intern setting out to learn as much as he could. He was originally mentored by the Honorable Justice Frances Bourliot, Jackie Carpenter, and the Honorable Judge Te’iva Bell. Sosa tried his first felony case as an intern with Juvenile Division Chief Steven Halpert. They were able to get a probation on a 2nd Degree Felony – Deadly Weapon charge. Jason handled the punishment phase of the trial which moved two jurors to tears. Sosa tried his first Murder Case as first chair in 2019 in front of Judge Robert Johnson. It was a retrial of a case where the client had received 35 years before the case was reversed on appeal. Despite facing limitations on self-defense, Sosa got a sentence of 19 years in the retrial.

Sosa has been an strong mentor and teacher while her at our office. He has even been asked to teach at other Public Defender’s Offices, to speak at TCDLA events, and will be presenting at a national CLE for NACDL this February. Jason graduated from Gideon’s Promise in 2016 and Trial Lawyer’s College in 2017. He has continued to serve on the Trial Lawyer’s College Alumni Board and became part of the prestigious teaching faculty in the Fall of 2021. Jason is also one of less than 100 Lawyers in the nation to have become designated as a Lawyer Scientist by the American Chemistry Society. When our lawyers get appointed on intoxication-related offenses, they often turn to Sosa for help. He always lends a helping hand and more. Never from a spirit of seeking recognition, but from his desire to help lawyers help their clients. Jason has always been one to step up and help where help is needed, the office jokester that always made you laugh, and never afraid to try out new methods and practice in mock scenarios. Once Cobra Kai always Cobra Kai. Once PDO, always PDO. Whether it’s for Harris County or Concho County, keep true to your philosophy of helping clients and your fellow advocates Jason. We will miss you!