Prof. McCormack Elected State Supreme Court Justice

Bridget McCormack campaigned hard, fought back against an expensive ad campaign against her, and got a little help from *The West Wing* on her way to becoming the state’s newest Supreme Court justice.

McCormack was the cofounder and codirector of the Michigan Innocence Clinic, as well as the associate dean for clinical affairs, at Michigan Law. Last year, she became one of the nominees for state Supreme Court nominated by the Democratic Party.

It was an exhausting campaign for the mother of four teenagers; she still had to get the kids to school and to swim practice, even while trying to win a statewide office. Now that she is on the court, her biggest job, she says, remains “being CEO of my household.”

She also is making the transition from being an advocate to a jurist. “I’m definitely not going in with guns blazing, with some big agenda. I believe a constitutional democracy works best when it is following the rule of law.”

“Sometimes the rule of law might not be exactly the law you would have wished for, but the court’s job is to uphold it anyway,” McCormack says.

While she hadn’t served as a judge prior to running for the Supreme Court, she points out that, historically, law schools have been feeders to judgeships. Both jobs, she says, involve the deciphering and understanding of appellate decision-making.

On the path to winning the eight-year seat, McCormack was the only candidate to receive 10 out of 10 newspaper endorsements. Her profile grew even more when she enlisted the help of cast members from *The West Wing* to create a video in support of her candidacy and as a public service announcement to remind people to vote the nonpartisan section of the ballot.

Martin Sheen’s President Bartlet character says on the video: “If people fail to realize that a straight ticket doesn’t count in nonpartisan races, if they just casually vote the party line, then their interests will continue to go unrepresented.”

The video came about with the help of McCormack’s sister, actress Mary McCormack, who portrayed Deputy National Security Adviser Kate Harper on *The West Wing*. More than a million people have watched the video on YouTube.

McCormack also drew unwanted attention. A D.C.–based organization, The Judicial Crisis Network, spent $1 million on an ad against McCormack just in the final week leading up to the election. The ad said McCormack “volunteered to help free a terrorist.” In reality, McCormack and her clinic students were among a group of hundreds of volunteer lawyers enlisted by the Center for Constitutional Rights to provide legal representation to Guantanamo detainees so the government could proceed with their cases. The prisoner assigned to her clinic was released from Guantanamo by the Bush administration without McCormack ever having met with or spoken to him.

Because of Michigan’s campaign finance laws, the group does not have to reveal the identities of its funding sources. The anonymity troubles McCormack. “Opaque campaign finance rules are particularly troublesome in judicial elections—the public confidence in the court’s independence takes a big hit,” she says.

McCormack, who is married to Michigan Law Professor Steven Croley—currently on leave from the Law School while he serves as deputy White House counsel—will continue to be a lecturer at the Law School, as time permits. This term, she is teaching a course on a topic she understands very well: judicial elections.—KV

Chief Justice Robert P. Young Jr. administers the judicial oath to Bridget McCormack.