



## Judge William Norris

[by Teresa Talerico]

On How to Land a Prestigious Clerkship

In 1955, William Norris, fresh out of Stanford Law School, began clerking for Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. It was the year after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark case that banned segregation in public schools. Judge Norris, Douglas' lone clerk, found himself amid a flurry of civil rights orders as the Court began prohibiting the exclusion of African-Americans in many other settings--from public golf courses to beaches to universities.

"It was very intense, if for no other reason than Justice Douglas had only one law clerk and all the other justices at that time had two," Judge Norris said in a recent interview. "It was very demanding, but it was such a heady experience. It was all worthwhile."

Judge Norris went on to become managing partner of the Los Angeles firm Tuttle & Taylor, where he worked as senior litigator for 24 years. In 1980, he became a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

Judge Norris, who would appoint his own clerks for 17 years during his tenure on the Ninth Circuit, recently offered advice on how to land a prestigious clerkship. Judge Norris was known as a "feeder judge" to the higher court; many of his clerks went on to clerk at the Supreme Court and are now law professors, successful attorneys, even a dean of the University of Michigan's law school. Here are his recommendations for landing a clerkship:

**Have an impressive academic record.** Not

surprisingly, Judge Norris said this is the first thing he looked for in a prospective clerk. He calls it the "foundation" of any good clerk.

"I look for people who are very smart," said Judge Norris, now senior counsel specializing in appellate litigation at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld in Los Angeles. "If you don't have a really outstanding academic record, forget it. (But) that's not enough; you've got to have more than that."

**Offer more than just smarts.** Other factors, such as communication skills, common sense, and perseverance, are often just as important as intelligence and academic achievement.

"I look for writing ability. I look for oral, verbal skills," Judge Norris said. "I look for good, practical judgment, good instincts about the law, good instincts about what the law ought to be."

**Be prepared for anything,** Judge Norris advises aspiring clerks. As a judge, he always looked for people who could juggle a variety of issues and assignments with aplomb. His clerks participated in every aspect of his work--from reading briefs and discussing cases to preparing memoranda and drafting opinions.

"They have to be generalists," he said. "I never know what kind of cases I'll be getting. I could have them working on a tax case on the same day they're working on a death case, and there might be an execution date

set. That just suggests the variety of cases a federal appellate judge has to deal with."

**Demonstrate you can handle new challenges and constructive criticism.** As Judge Norris would sort through applications from hundreds of graduates from prestigious law schools--"each record as dazzling as the next"--he sometimes wondered if a candidate's brainpower had allowed him or her to coast a bit.

"I think maybe some of them had never been challenged before," he said. "They were so smart, they had gotten all the way through college and law school and did so well, I don't think they were really challenged."

He recalled one bright and earnest young clerk from Harvard who proudly showed Judge Norris his first draft of an opinion. Judge Norris sent him back to rewrite it...about ten times. The clerk grew more and more deflated with each draft. "I really hope I have it this time," he remarked anxiously. Judge Norris finally nodded, approved the work and praised the clerk's efforts.

"I said, 'Fine, now it's beginning to sing,'" he recalled. "That was my test: did it sing?"

Clerks must be prepared for those kinds of high standards...and must be capable of humility when the job calls for it.

"It's very demanding," he said. "It takes a lot of work. You have to be your own toughest critic. You have to leave your ego at the door and put it aside and be willing to mix it up."



Above all, be yourself. Judge Norris received this very advice as a young Stanford Law graduate embarking on his interview for the clerkship with Justice Douglas. It worked for him. He also urges law school graduates to aim high, as he did, and to never sell themselves short.

"Work hard in law school, do your best, and be yourself," he said. "Shoot high."