

Rebecca Bradley, shown at her Milwaukee home in August, says: "I was blessed with parents who instilled in us a strong work ethic, the value of education and the importance of God and family."



# Following the law

## *Supreme Court Justice Rebecca Bradley is out to prove that voters got it right*

**G**iven the stench that arose from last spring's Wisconsin Supreme Court race after Democrats baldly injected partisan politics into a nonpartisan election, voters might be forgiven for not noticing that they managed to pick a winner uniquely qualified to serve on the court in the 21st century.

Justice Rebecca Bradley, who handily defeated Appeals Court Judge JoAnne Kloppenburg on April 5, has an enviable résumé. It's packed with more experience in more widely varied aspects of the law than any of her colleagues on the state's highest court.

And Bradley, 45, is determined to convince everyone — even her political detractors — that the voters got it right.

With more than 1.9 million votes cast in the largest turnout ever for a Wisconsin Supreme Court race, Bradley garnered more than a million votes. She survived vicious attacks by a union-funded group, an array of Democratic politicians all the way up to Hillary Clinton, Kloppenburg herself and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel — which three weeks before the election published a flawed story accusing Bradley of having an extramarital affair with a client over a decade ago, even though her ex-husband says he told a reporter it wasn't true.

The voters didn't care, favoring Bradley, 52 to 47 percent.

She uses an anecdote from the campaign to explain her victory. A fellow lawyer approached her after a campaign event and introduced himself by saying, "I'm to the left of Bernie Sanders."

"I want you to know where I'm coming from when I say I'm going to vote for you," he continued. "I believe you will follow the law."

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### ON THE FRONTLINES OF REFORM

*by Sunny Schubert*

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Bradley adds, "That's what people in Wisconsin want."

"I've now gone through two campaigns. I know there are people who will never support me because I was initially appointed by Scott Walker, and others who think Walker can do no wrong," she says.

"But most people are truly between those extremes. They want judges and justices to have a conservative judicial philosophy, which is not the same as a conservative political philosophy.

"They want judges who are smart. They want judges who are tough on crime. But, mostly, they want judges who will follow the law."

#### **A middle-class childhood**

Rebecca Grassl Bradley grew up in Milwaukee, just three miles from where she currently lives.

"My father was James Grassl. He died 20 years ago, shortly after I graduated from law school. My mom is Barbara Grassl. She was a full-time mother of four until my father lost his job as a purchasing manager for a printing

company during the 1980s recession.

"My mom retired from the Medical College of Wisconsin as an administrative assistant several years ago. She still lives in the house I grew up in."

Bradley has two sisters and a brother. Her sister Susan is a preschool teacher who lives in New Berlin. Her sister Virginia lives in Maryland and is a scientist who earned her Ph.D. in genetics from Oxford. Her brother, Jim, lives in New Berlin and is a teacher and coach at South Milwaukee High School.

Bradley remembers a childhood filled with love, centered around the Catholic Church, but without much money.

"My family struggled financially when I was growing up, but my parents ensured that we would have excellent education." She and her sisters attended Divine Savior Holy Angels High School; her brother attended Pius High School.

"I was blessed with parents who instilled in us a strong work ethic, the value of education and the importance of God and family. We remain a close family," she says. She still attends church today.

Bradley first developed an interest in law while in high school. "I loved reading and I loved writing, and I started thinking about law school," she says.

She graduated from Marquette University with a degree in economics and business administration in 1993, unknowingly leaving behind evidence that political opponents would use to tarnish her two decades later.

She'd been invited to write columns for a feature in the college newspaper called Crossfire, which pitted liberal and conservative students against each other.

When three columns she had written denigrating gays, likening abortion to the Holocaust and calling Democratic voters stupid and evil came to light during this year's campaign, Bradley immediately apologized. She said that what she wrote in 1992 did not reflect the woman she had become.

"The Marquette Tribune was looking for students to take provocative positions. I was way too provocative," she says ruefully. "I'm very sorry. I wish I hadn't published the particular columns."

"I realize that my words had hurt people. It's not who I am today," she says.

## **Law school and beyond**

She moved to Madison in 1993 to attend the University of Wisconsin Law School. "The environment in Madison was different than Milwaukee, but I loved it. It's a wonderful town," she says.

"Especially in the law school, there were people with many different viewpoints, students and professors. We were taught to analyze things differently. And students back then were interested in hearing a variety of viewpoints," she says.

"I'm not sure you find that on campuses today."

After graduation, Bradley joined the Milwaukee law firm of Hinshaw & Culbertson, where she represented physicians in malpractice lawsuits and defended individuals and businesses in product liability and personal injury cases.

Then she moved to Whyte Hirschboeck Dudek, one of the state's biggest and most prestigious law firms, where she worked in commercial, information technology and intellectual property law, including the Internet.

She left to become an executive at the RedPrairie soft-



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ware firm (now JDA), but after three years in the business sector, she returned to Whyte, where she worked for 12 years altogether.

Outside of her law practice, Bradley was an active volunteer in the legal community, serving as president of the Milwaukee Federalist Society chapter and as a member of the Thomas More Society and the Republican National Lawyers Association.

Today, she enjoys running, plays competitive tennis, reads and travels. She holds season tickets to UW football games. She is engaged to an executive at a software company.

### **A wide-ranging judicial career**

In December 2012, the governor appointed Bradley to the Milwaukee County Circuit Court, where she served in the juvenile court division. Four months later, she was elected to a six-year term.

Her years in juvenile court were eye-opening. “I have deep admiration for the lawyers and social workers who have dedicated their lives to improving children’s lives. It’s an art, not a science,” she says.

“I had some kids check in with me every 30 days, so I could keep an eye on them. The kids who were doing well while dealing with terrific peer pressure to do otherwise, sometimes they’d tell me I was the only person who ever said anything positive to them,” she remembers. “It was heartbreaking sometimes, with kids showing up in court with no parents ...

“I tried to treat everyone with compassion and respect. I developed a reputation for being a very caring person, for being calm and empathetic, and for always following the law.”

In 2014, Walker appointed Bradley to the District 1 Court of Appeals, to replace esteemed Judge Ralph Adam Fine, who had died. Although she says she missed the hands-on work of a juvenile court judge, “I felt like I was returning a bit to the roots of my practice, reading and writing opinions.”

But just a year later, the governor tapped her again, naming her to the state Supreme Court after the sudden death of Justice Patrick Crooks. A few months later, the state’s voters affirmed Walker’s choice.

### **High court ‘courteous and collegial’**

Bradley joined a high court divided along ideological lines

and supposedly fraught with partisan tension.

However, she says, accusations of incivility among the justices are overblown. “I think it’s more collegial than people believe,” she says.

“The court functions much better than it is portrayed in the media. We have disagreements, but I think it’s healthy. We argue points of law and administrative issues — we’re technically in charge of all the courts in the state — but we are always courteous and collegial in our discussions,” Bradley says.

She believes her untraditional background will aid the court.

“I’m the only justice who has served at three levels of the court system: circuit court, appellate court and Supreme Court. I think that’s a positive. And while I’m not the only justice to have been a business executive, I know how things work in the real world.

“I’ve seen firsthand how our decisions affect real people, from children and parents to businesses that create jobs,” she says.

She hopes to follow the example of former Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson in making the workings of the state’s top court understandable to the public.

“One of my goals on the Supreme Court is to write opinions that are very clearly written, very plainly written,” she says. “We are not writing for lawyers. If you use too much legalese, you risk losing your audience. Anyone should be able to pick up an opinion and read it.”

Asked about the idea that Wisconsin should change its constitution so that judges and justices are appointed, not elected, Bradley says, “Well, I’ve been selected and I’ve been elected.

“I commend the governor for the selection process he’s put in place. It’s a very comprehensive process,” she says.

“But our state constitution calls for our people to elect our judges, and I will always defend our constitution. Our people are pretty smart. By and large, they’ve made good choices.” **WI**

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