

## Music Alum Uses Performance Skills in the Courtroom

by Kristin Kemp



Property disputes. Theft. Child Abuse. Murder. These are the types of trials Judge Elizabeth Weishaupl (BM, vocal performance, '85; BA, history, '86; JD '89) oversees from the bench in her Arapahoe County Justice Center courtroom, where she has served as a judge for the 18th Judicial District since 2008.

In April, Weishaupl hosted DU undergraduate students in her courtroom. The students – whose majors range from computer science to political science to psychology – got to sit in the jury box while the judge shared her unusual career path with them and offered novel advice about pursuing a legal career.

"I've been told by a handful of adults not to go to law school, but meeting Judge Weishaupl made me excited about pursuing a law degree," said Alex Songer, a senior political science and geography major who attended the courthouse tour. "Hearing her say she never regretted the decision to become a lawyer and a judge was encouraging. I could tell that as an alum, she genuinely cares about fostering communication between DU undergraduates and professionals in the world of law."

DU offers career advice to all students, including resume assistance, interview prep and alumni networking opportunities. Weishaupl, who has taught law at the Sturm College of Law and the National Institute for Trial Advocacy, agreed to host DU undergraduate students to give them an insider's peek into a courtroom.

Weishaupl is a third generation native Coloradan and grew up in Littleton before attending DU. Though she initially didn't know what she wanted to do for a living, she had a passion and talent for music. When DU offered her a scholarship to study vocal performance, she took it.

A Bachelor of Music in vocal performance degree at the Lamont School of Music is rigorous and has a demanding schedule and credit load. Nonetheless, during Weishaupl's senior year she realized she was just a few credits shy of a second degree, so she decided to stay at DU for an extra quarter to obtain her BA in history before starting law school at DU.

Though it wasn't originally intentional, her degree in vocal performance proved invaluable in law school and during trials. "In music classes, my classmates and I constructively critiqued each other all the time. I learned how to handle criticism and how to use it to my advantage to improve my performance," said Weishaupl. "When I got to law school, some of the trial professors were tough on us. It didn't faze me, but it really rattled some of my classmates. The same proved to be true in my career as a trial lawyer during contentious cases."

But when she first began her career in private practice after law school, Weishaupl found herself unsatisfied. So she made the decision to take a big pay cut to become an Assistant Attorney General for the State of Colorado where she could do work that felt more meaningful to her. During her eight years there she represented universities and colleges, judges, the Governor and had a case appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

Defying the 'struggling artist' stereotype, Weishaupl became a struggling lawyer. Thankfully her experience in vocal performance came in handy again: she landed lucrative weekend choir gigs and

Opera Colorado performances. “I’ve always loved singing, but I never intended to become a professional musician. I wouldn’t have guessed that my music degree would bail me out financially during my legal career, but it did!” said Weishaupl.

Her early decision to take a pay cut for a more meaningful job proved wise. Weishaupl subsequently became an Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Colorado, and then was offered a seat on the bench.

As a judge, Weishaupl shoulders a lot of responsibility. She oversees dozens of trials a year in her courtroom that range from bodily injury cases to theft to murder. She is also responsible for sentencing convicted criminals based on the jury’s verdict and her interpretation of the case.

“Sentencing young people is particularly hard,” said Weishaupl. “I’d rather not have my first introduction to someone be when they are sitting in the defendant’s chair – especially young people,” said Weishaupl. She devotes a lot of volunteer hours reaching out to young people, and she offers courtroom tours to anyone who’s interested, including all of her jurors.

“Jury duty is one of the most important civic functions a citizen can do,” said Weishaupl. “I’m glad DU students came to visit. Regardless of if they decide to pursue a legal career or not, they will likely serve in a jury box. Who knows? Maybe it will be in my courtroom!” Mainly, she encouraged the students to follow her example: figure out what they love and find fun, work hard and be open to new opportunities – albeit seemingly risky ones. For her, she loved music, so she majored in it. She loved trial law, so she pursued a career as an Assistant US Attorney. This path ultimately led her to the bench, which she says has been her best job yet.