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Victor Vital – DBA Trial Lawyer of the Year

BY JESSICA D. SMITH

During his college years, a love of arguing—and a well-timed suggestion—set **Victor Vital** on a path to law. Years later, that resolve and dedication result in the honor of being named the 2025 Dallas Bar Association Trial Lawyer of the Year, a fitting recognition of a lifelong commitment to the Rule of Law.

Victor’s legal career began with a spark of curiosity but quickly grew into a calling. While studying in college, a friend casually suggested law school, knowing Victor’s natural talent for argument. “I decided to become a lawyer in college immediately after a friend of mine off-handedly asked me, ‘Why don’t you go to law school since you love arguing so much?’” Victor recalled. “I had never considered law school, but the idea made sense immediately, especially considering how I loved the courtroom scenes on the show *L.A. Law*.”

That cinematic inspiration quickly turned into real-world experience. One of his most formative memories comes from his earliest days as a young prosecutor in Harris County.

“I had just taken the bar exam but hadn’t received my results yet, so I was working under a third-year bar card. That first week, I found myself in court picking a jury, examining witnesses, and presenting my case,” Victor said. “It was exhilarating. That thrill hasn’t gone away 30 years later.”

Over the span of his career, Victor has become widely recognized for his skill in the courtroom, his ability to connect with juries, and his sharp instincts under pressure.

What sets Victor apart is his natural ability to dive into even the most complex legal issues and quickly make sense of them. Whether he’s handling a business dispute, an intellectual property matter, or a high-stakes criminal case, he has a talent for turning complicated facts into compelling stories that resonate in the courtroom. Clients turn to Victor not because of tenure or title, but because he brings a fresh perspective, sharp strategy, and a clear understanding of what really matters. He earns trust fast—and delivers results—whether at trial or at the negotiating table.

Recently, Victor returned to Haynes Boone in the position of Global Chair of the Trials Practice Group. The group is comprised of a deep bench of experienced litigators in the United States, London, and Mexico City who practice across many industries, helping clients resolve complex and high-stakes disputes in federal, state and international courts as well as



Victor Vital

through arbitration. In his new position, he has significantly elevated the Haynes Boone internal training program by designing an in-house trial academy to equip the next generation of litigators with essential trial advocacy skills through immersive instruction, hands-on workshops, and live mock trials.

“As litigation becomes more complex and the stakes grow higher, firms must train lawyers who not only know the law and can write great motions, but who can also tell a compelling story under pressure. The HB Trial Academy was developed to lay a foundation upon which Haynes Boone litigators can build to eventually try disputes of consequence,” he stated in a recent interview with *Texas Lawbook*.

He attributed his return to the firm to the strength of Haynes Boone’s alumni program, stating that the connection of the alumni group helped him create a full-circle moment, returning to the place where he first made partner.

Victor’s work spans high-stakes civil and white-collar criminal cases, consistently earning him accolades across the legal profession. He is a Fellow of the Litigation Counsel of America, Dallas Bar Foundation, American Bar Foundation, and the Texas Bar Foundation and is a member of the American Law Institute. He has been recognized by

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DBA Jurist of the Year: Catharina Haynes

BY JESSICA D. SMITH

Some people discover their calling late in life. Others seem born with it. At just 10 years old, **Catharina Haynes** knew exactly what she wanted to be: a lawyer. Several decades later, that childhood vision has come full circle—culminating in being named the 2025 Dallas Bar Association’s **Hon. Barbara M.G. Lynn Jurist of the Year**.

The award was established to honor judges who make significant contributions to the legal community in the North Texas area and demonstrate high ideals, exemplary personal character, and judicial competence.

“Judge Haynes first made an impression upon me when I was a law clerk at Thompson & Knight and she was the rising star associate. She was knowledgeable and well respected as one of the model associates. Her years on the bench confirm that she continues to be well respected in the legal community. Throughout her busy career, she has remained supportive of the Dallas Bar Association, by not only attending herself, but also bringing her law clerks who are interested in coming,” said Vicki Blanton, DBA President.

Judge Haynes grew up in Brevard County, Florida and graduated with honors from the Florida Institute of Technology with a B.S. in Psychology. She then pursued her childhood dream of becoming a lawyer by attending Emory University School of Law where she was a Notes and Comments Editor of the *Emory Law Journal* and a member of Order of the Coif. In 1986, she received her J.D. with distinction.

“My family had no lawyers (mainly teachers and scientists), but my grandparents talked to me at a young age about the importance of justice for all. It occurred to me that becoming a lawyer would assist justice for all, so I decided at age 10 to become one,” said Judge Haynes.

She made her way to Dallas on the advice of her Director of Placement and Alumni Relations who recommended that she spend part of her second-year summer at a law firm in Dallas. Her summer internship led her to not only



Catharina Haynes, age 10

her legal practice and the foundation for her prolific career in the Dallas legal community, but also to the happy meeting of her husband, attorney **Craig Haynes** (they celebrated their 37th anniversary this year).

Judge Haynes spent 13 years in private practice, including serving as a partner at a large law firm. She is board certified in Consumer and Commercial Law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. She was appointed as a Circuit Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in April of 2008, having been confirmed by the Senate. Prior to taking the federal bench, she served eight years as a state district judge in Dallas.

To say that Judge Haynes is active in the legal community is an understatement. She has been on, and on some, led numerous Boards, groups, Inns of Courts, and more. She hosts legal interns every summer, not only mentoring them, but also bringing them to DBA luncheons, and introducing them to the Dallas legal community. She has served on the DBA Board of Directors, on the Alumni Advisory Board of the Emory University School of Law, as Chair of the Appellate Judges Education Institute, and as

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JOIN NOW & SAVE!

Newly joining members that join the DBA during the month of September will save over 30% on Dues, receiving up to 16 months of membership for the price of 12 months. Membership will be valid through December 31, 2026.

Questions? Contact membership@dallasbar.org.

This special is available to NEW MEMBERS of the DBA (never joined before) or former DBA members that have not paid dues since 2023.

Focus

Family Law

Family Law Issues in Probate or Federal Court

BY LAWRENCE J. PRAEGER

In Texas, family law cases are heard either in a county or district court of general jurisdiction. Some larger counties, however, have specialized family law courts. Dallas County, for example, has seven family law district courts. These courts hear exclusively family law matters, including divorce, child custody and support, termination of parental rights, and parentage/paternity cases. The family law courts also hear modification and enforcement of these orders.

Specialized courts have a number of advantages. Among the more important are standing orders that eliminate the need to run to the courthouse and get an injunction when a case is filed; specialized procedural rules and a requirement for producing documents at an initial hearing, which often occurs prior to the answer date; avoiding a re-set because another type of case takes priority; judges who generally have a greater knowledge of community property law than is typically found in courts of gen-

eral jurisdiction; and a more predictable judiciary because a practitioner can observe how a judge generally rules on a larger number of similar fact patterns.

Nevertheless, sometimes the relative comfort of practicing in a specialized court is no longer available, although the issue is solidly a family law matter—for example, where a client alleges that she is the spouse by informal or common law marriage of an individual who died intestate. The family law practitioner is then in the position of having to address the existence of an informal marriage in probate court. An heirship determination is generally decided by the judge as a matter of law. The Estates Code (Section 55.002), however, states that in a contested probate or mental illness proceeding, a party is entitled to a jury trial, just like any other civil matter. Upon request, a probate court will submit to a jury the issue of the existence of an informal or common-law marriage prior to hearing the heirship determination.

Issues of marriage, divorce, and prop-

erty division are generally considered matters of state law. Nevertheless, family law practitioners can find themselves in federal court due to the operation of federal legislation—specifically, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA). ERISA governs private-sector retirement and health plans and outlines standards for plan administration, fiduciary responsibilities, and participant rights in private plans. Corporations, many of which are multi-state or multi-national, have developed rules for employment benefits. These rules are not required to mirror the particular state law where the employee is located. For example, although Texas does not recognize domestic partnerships, some private corporations recognize such unions for the purpose of awarding employment benefits.

Thus, a client who unsuccessfully alleges in probate court that she is a common-law spouse may still have a remedy if her “partner” had been an employee of a corporation that awards benefits to a domestic partner or spouse.

In that situation, she may proceed under ERISA, which requires benefits to be distributed in accordance with the rules, definitions, and regulations of the employer’s plan.

The determination of a domestic partnership is made by the employer’s Plan Administrator, who often may be in another state. If this determination is contested, a Plan Administrator and/or insurance company—if life insurance proceeds are an issue—will address this situation by filing an interpleader action and placing the funds in the registry of the federal court in the district where the decedent last resided. The federal district court will then hear whether the Plan’s administrative determination of domestic partnership was proper and whether the individual qualifies under the terms of the Plan. What started as an interesting informal marriage case in family district court therefore eventually may migrate to the probate court and potentially even to the U.S. district court.

Lawrence J. Praeger, of the Law Office of Lawrence J. Praeger P.C., may be reached at lpdraeger@praegerlaw.com.

20th Anniversary Platinum

Noche de Luz Gala

Honoring 20 Years: A Platinum Celebration

Saturday, September 27th, 2025
7:00PM - 11:00PM
Joule Hotel

BLOOD DRIVE

Hosted by the DBA Community Involvement Committee

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- 4.5 million Americans need a blood transfusion each year.
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🕒 **Wednesday, October 8, 2025**

📍 **Arts District Mansion**

10:00 AM – 2:00 PM

2101 Ross Avenue

🕒 **Saturday, October 11, 2025**

📍 **Flight of the Monarch Event**

NOON – 6:00 PM

2960 Epic Place, Grand Prairie

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7pm | Dinner
8pm | Fireside Chat
9pm | VIP Reception (Invite Only)

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