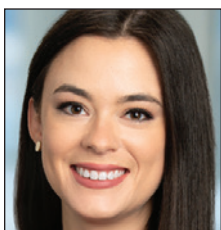




Teacher, Mentor, Friend: Hon. Rebecca Rutherford

U.S. Magistrate Judge, Northern District of Texas

by Jordan R. Curry



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As those of us who practice law in Dallas may know, Judge Rebecca Rutherford began her second term as magistrate judge in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas in January 2026. I have had the absolute pleasure of knowing her for the better part of a decade, since she began her first term. By some stroke of luck on my part, I was the first of many young lawyers Judge Rutherford hired as a law clerk. And what a fortunate bunch we are. The already extraordinary opportunity to serve the court comes, in Judge Rutherford's chambers, with a warm-hearted teacher who never shuts her office door, welcomes questions (big and small), and serves as a mentor who, in my case, became like family. In these paragraphs I will share a small glimpse into Judge Rutherford's life so that you may get to know—and admire—her like I do.

Family Background

Judge Rutherford was born in San Antonio, Texas, while her father was stationed at Fort Sam Houston. Judge Rutherford's father is an Army veteran and a physician, and her mother is a nurse. She is the oldest of four children.

Judge Rutherford speaks fondly of her family, especially her parents. She recounts: "I was raised in a close-knit, traditional family that emphasized education and public service. My parents encouraged me to learn as much as I could, then use that knowledge to contribute to something bigger than myself."

She describes her mother as executive; bold; a doer. Her mother was "an advocate in her own way," exemplified by her career as a school nurse. As a matter of fact, in the latter years of her career, the judge's mom worked as the school nurse administrator for her school district, coordinating student healthcare for one of the state's larger districts, and served as the president of the National Association of School Nurses.

Judge Rutherford describes her father as an intellectual and a storyteller. He is a history fanatic and an avid reader. If he hadn't been a doctor, he would have



made a great professor. While serving as an Army doc in the 1970s, he trained in radiology—just as modern medical imaging was taking off. In this fascinating specialty, he and his colleagues experimented with new techniques and "some cutting-edge stuff." According to family lore, Fort Sam had a new ultrasound machine and the word among the doctors was that one could "look at a gestating baby with this thing." Eager to learn more, the judge's father brought in his then-pregnant wife. The couple got something not yet commonplace and, at the time, a little magical: a glimpse of their son, the judge's little brother.

With such role models as parents—a professor-type who loves to tell stories and student-health advocate—it is no wonder Judge Rutherford has found herself at the head of a classroom in multiple phases of her life. More on that to come.

Early Life

In 1976, the family moved to Lubbock, Texas, where the judge grew up. Her fondest memories are from her summers on the family's ranch in Garza County, southeast of Lubbock, where she would pass precious

time with her brothers and sister. “I remember the four of us kicking up caliche dust as we hiked on ranch roads and cow paths. We’d spend all day outside, hiking through the untamed beauty of the South Plains,” she says. The ranch remains a special place for the judge and her family.

Today, the Rutherfords have a lovely sitting area in their home where I have visited with them on multiple occasions. Displayed on the shelf in the sitting area is a beautiful, tanned snakeskin. I once asked about it and learned it was from a massive (more than four feet long) Western Diamondback rattlesnake the family encountered on one of those ranch roads. To the judge, it is a metaphor for the balance between beauty and danger. To me, this anecdote captures the judge’s childhood: adventurous, outdoorsy, and fun.

In high school, the judge joined an Explorer Post, a high adventure outdoor scouting program. As a teenager, she spent weekends and holidays camping, hiking, canoeing, and spelunking. In the winters, the Post would go cross-country skiing. She met her future husband, Scott, on one of those ski trips in New Mexico. Scott is an accomplished outdoorsman himself and an Eagle Scout. In college, the judge and Scott both worked as Rangers at Philmont Scout Ranch, guiding crews on backpacking treks and teaching backcountry skills. To this day, hiking remains her favorite pastime.

Judge Rutherford tells me that she has wanted to be a lawyer since she was a girl. With three younger siblings, she was often the one trying to mediate, explain, or make sure everyone got a turn, and becoming a lawyer felt like a natural extension of that. Besides, being a lawyer sounded important, and she received positive reinforcement from adults when she shared that aspiration with them. “When adults told me I’d make a good lawyer, I held onto that. Thank goodness my parents and other adults believed in me and encouraged me.”

Simultaneously, she always wanted to be a teacher. Like her dad, the judge loves learning, and she loves school. “I was drawn to teaching because I like learning new things and I see teachers as mentors for learners. Teachers help others work through difficult material and grow more confident in their own thinking.” She was fortunate enough to have had many teachers in her life she admired—especially English and history teachers.

At Southern Methodist University, she participated in the University Honors Program and graduated *summa cum laude* with honors in the liberal arts. Initially, she followed in her teachers’—and her mother’s—footsteps to the schoolhouse.

The judge taught middle-school English/Language Arts for three years in Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD, a school district in a Dallas suburb. She has fond memories from teaching. “Teaching middle school was one of the most formative experiences of my life. It helped me develop skills I rely on every day as a judge, like how to ask good questions and keep lessons—or proceedings—focused and respectful.” The judge says she learned from

her seventh-grade students what fairness looks like: “Fairness means not playing favorites. You have to have the same expectations for, and apply the same consequences to, everyone.”

I didn’t know Judge Rutherford then, but I can tell she was extremely suited to teach a curriculum focused on reading analysis covering both contemporary and classic texts, as well as writing development. It’s no secret a career law clerk (more on that to come) excels as a writer. But also, she’s the only person I know with a knack for bringing up the work of Shakespeare or Hemingway in everyday conversation.

After three years in the classroom, the judge decided it was time for a change. She told me: “I always wanted to be both a teacher and a lawyer. To me, the two jobs have a lot in common: both professions are about helping people understand something. And I thought the law would give me a way to do that on a broader scale.” To make good on that other childhood aspiration, she headed back to SMU for law school on a generous merit scholarship.

Throughout these formative years, Scott remained a constant presence. He provided a steadying influence, viewing the judge’s professional ambition not as a challenge to be managed, but as a core component of their shared life. This partnership proved essential as she navigated the rigors of her early legal career. As she tells it, “Scott has always been the one who made sure my professional objectives and our home life were never in competition. He provided the space for me to pursue those goals while keeping our shared priorities at the forefront.”

Legal Career

At SMU Dedman School of Law, Judge Rutherford’s legal education was defined by a combination of high-level scholarship and direct litigation experience. She took multiple legal-writing courses, served as an Articles Editor for the law review, and had her student comment published. As a student attorney in the Civil Clinic, she first-chaired a week-long federal jury trial for a pro bono client. Judge Rutherford graduated second in her class in 1998.

That fall, she joined the chambers of Hon. A. Joe Fish, U.S. district judge for the Northern District of Texas. Judge Rutherford describes Judge Fish as quite like her father—he loves to tell stories. He is gentle, reserved, and intelligent. The judge recalls: “If I learned that the judge’s job is to be prepared, it was from him.” He is now her colleague.

During her term with Judge Fish, Judge Rutherford met Hon. Jane Boyle. At that time, Judge Boyle was a magistrate judge for the Northern District. It was from Judge Boyle that Judge Rutherford learned about this unique job she would one day occupy. Judge Boyle passed along to Judge Rutherford an aspiration she might not have had otherwise as well as a belief in her that she could achieve it. Judge Boyle is now her colleague.

After her term with Judge Fish, Judge Rutherford spent several years in the real estate practice group at Thompson & Knight, LLP in Dallas—a firm that was known for high-profile transactions and litigation that shaped business in Texas and the Southwest. In addition to working on deals during her time in private practice, she also took on any and all adversarial matters that came across her desk; a litigator at heart. Her years in private practice gave her a deep appreciation for the pressures lawyers face: deadlines, client expectations, billable hours. That experience helps explain why professionalism and civility matter so deeply to her.

Though she enjoyed her work and her colleagues at Thompson & Knight, Judge Rutherford left the firm in 2004. She was headed toward partnership as a real estate lawyer, but that was not the life she saw for herself, and she hadn't forgotten about the goal she had set years before to be a judge. She says she made “a deliberate, and difficult, decision to step off the traditional track” and return to clerking. While she admires law firm partners for their deep specialization and long-term commitments to a particular niche, clerking exposed her to a wider range of cases, helped her to sharpen her research and writing skills from the court's perspective, and developed in her the kind of broad judgment that specialization alone doesn't always provide.

Back to the court went Judge Rutherford—this time as a career law clerk to Magistrate Judge Jeff Kaplan, a former law-firm litigator and state court of appeals justice. Judge Rutherford worked for Judge Kaplan for about eight years. Judge Kaplan, as a boss and mentor, was kind yet formal. He was a stickler for intellectual honesty. “He insisted on doing the hard work of applying the law to the facts—even when they cut against your own preferences and sympathies.” And he was exacting. She recalls that Judge Kaplan could hold a printed draft judicial opinion in his hands and, assessing its weight, declare it could be more concise. And, Judge Rutherford tells me, he was usually right! Working for Judge Kaplan was an exercise in writing on often-complex topics in a way that could be digested by not only other courts and lawyers, but also lay parties, no matter their level of sophistication. Judge Rutherford strives to produce opinions to this day that bear this quality.

When Judge Kaplan retired from the bench in 2012, Judge Rutherford transitioned to the chambers of Hon. Paul Stickney, one of Judge Kaplan's fellow magistrate judges. (This observation is entirely my own: I consider Judge Stickney to have been the yin to Judge Kaplan's yang. Judge Stickney, a career federal public defender, is as casual as they come: an amateur painter, a rider of motorcycles, a beachgoer.) Judge Stickney knew of Judge Rutherford's aspiration of becoming a magistrate judge and showed her the ropes on the criminal docket. Judge Stickney's mentorship built a foundation in criminal law Judge Rutherford uses to this day.

In 2015, then Chief Judge Hon. Barbara Lynn offered Judge Rutherford a position as her career law clerk.

Judge Lynn is a living legend. There's no other way to put it. Before she was the first female chief judge of the Northern District of Texas, she was the first female associate, and later the first female partner, at a well-known Dallas law firm. In the three years Judge Rutherford worked for Judge Lynn, they “tried a bunch of cases”—something both women love to do to this day. Judge Lynn is widely regarded as a phenomenal mentor, and Judge Rutherford considers herself lucky to have worked for her. Says Judge Lynn: “It was my great honor and privilege to mentor Judge Rutherford when she was my career clerk. She absorbed advice like a sponge and then improved on it dramatically when she passed it on to others. She is a natural teacher and gives herself totally to professional excellence. By her hard work, engagement with the bar, authorship of smart, well-reasoned and thoughtful rulings, and by her perceptive and consequential advice, she inspires the newest generation of lawyers.”

Judge Rutherford describes clerking for so many different judges as akin to attending four graduate programs in judging: “each [judge] taught me something different, and together they formed the foundation of how I approach the work.”

In 2017, Judge Lynn, Judge Fish, Judge Boyle, and their colleagues on the court voted to appoint Judge Rutherford to the magistrate judge seat vacated by none other than Judge Stickney upon his retirement. Judge Rutherford officially took that bench in January 2018. We, the Dallas bar, have been lucky enough to practice before her since.

Impact on the Profession

What I think of Judge Rutherford is, no doubt, less important than the objective facts I've shared here and the things she has accomplished in her career. But I'll nonetheless share how she has shaped me professionally and personally.

I joined Judge Rutherford's chambers in 2019. I had just taken the bar. I was 25 years old. I had so much to learn (and still do). With Judge Rutherford at the helm, I learned how to keep a civil case moving, how to manage discovery disputes, how to write an opinion that would get the Kaplan stamp of approval, and so much more. I also learned from the best how to not only treat this career with the dedication it deserves but also reserve most of my heart for what matters more: family. Judge Rutherford remembers what it felt like to be told — directly and indirectly — that motherhood would derail her career, and she refuses to accept the notion that family is a liability. Her message is simple: your family is not an obstacle to your professional success, and no one gets to define your path but you.

The judge can switch from boss to big sister in an instant, and it was in the moments that she did so for me that she became someone I consider family. Judge Rutherford has been there for me as I transitioned from the court to private practice and as I have built my family.

In fact, in preparation to write this profile, I sat with the judge in her home office to hear some stories. We talked for hours, and all the while she held my newborn son.

I am not the only one who thinks so highly of Judge Rutherford. Her colleagues, law clerks, and local practitioners all agree that Judge Rutherford is the gold standard when it comes to being a mentor and a judge. “Judge Rutherford is uniquely gifted at seeing potential in people, especially young lawyers, and inspiring them to believe in themselves. This was my own experience. Judge Rutherford took the time to learn what my dreams were, encouraged me to pursue them, and really believed I could achieve them, even when I doubted that I could. I would not have the career I have today without her encouragement,” said Bridget O’Hickey, one of Judge Rutherford’s former law clerks. Assistant U.S. Attorney Luis Suarez shares, “As a young attorney entering Judge Rutherford’s court, it was immediately evident that the court is run with the utmost professionalism and respect. Litigants appearing before Judge Rutherford can always count on her thoughtful and careful consideration before entering a fair and impartial ruling grounded in the law.”

Judge Rutherford leaves her mark on law students, too. For several years, Judge Rutherford was an adjunct professor at Texas A&M University School of Law. There, she taught an experiential class for students who have secured, or hope to secure, judicial clerkships, which covers case management and judicial writing. Students complete draft opinions on various types of motions and practice the skills they will need for their clerkships. Since Judge Rutherford began teaching this course, more than 40 of her students have gone on to clerk in federal district and appellate courts as well as state high courts. In the fall, Judge Rutherford will take her commitment to legal education to a new arena when she joins the faculty of the Master of Legal Studies program at SMU Dedman School of Law. She will teach a specialized course focused on Litigation and Discovery—a field where she has already established herself as a subject-matter expert and thought leader. “As a Double Mustang, I’m excited to give back to my alma mater—especially at such a pivotal time. As companies increasingly leverage AI to bring litigation management in-house, the stakes for technical accuracy and judicial defensibility have never been higher.”

A Day in Her Life

Beyond her judicial and teaching duties, Judge Rutherford is a deeply involved leader who strives to promote civility, ethics, and professionalism. She is the current president of the William “Mac” Taylor American Inn of Court and a Benchler for several other local Inns of Court. She chairs the Dallas Bar Association Attorney Wellness Committee and is on the Board of Directors for the Dallas Women Lawyers Association and the SMU Dedman School of Law.

Some other fun facts about Judge Rutherford are that she is an all-day-long coffee drinker (black); a certified

Swiftie (attended the Eras Tour New Orleans 2024); a foodie; a lover of silk neck scarves (she generally doesn’t take the bench without one, her signature); a Dallas enthusiast; a loving pet owner to two curious cats, Sox and Karma; and a world traveler (she’s a self-proclaimed Francophile). These things are some of the threads of the fabric that is Judge Rutherford, but the strongest strand is that she’s a mom. “For all the joy I find in my work, nothing compares to the joy I find in my family. They are my grounding force and my greatest blessing.”

Judge Rutherford is most proud in life of her beautiful family. She has been married to Scott, now a finance professional and a certified sommelier through Wine & Spirit Education Trust, for more than 30 years. Scott is warm, lighthearted, and silly in the best way. Together, they have hiked trails and summited peaks across the United States, and their shared love of learning means that even vacations tend to revolve around history: museums, battlefields, and the stories that shaped the nation.

The pair are incredible parents to three bright young adults: a U.S. Marine Corps captain; a financial analyst for a regional airline; and a litigation project manager at an e-discovery law firm. Judge Rutherford is happiest when Scott and the kids are under one roof with her. She is proudest when she is celebrating one of their wins, like when her oldest married the love of his life last year, when her second graduated from the University of Oklahoma and found a fantastic career close to home, and when her youngest followed her heart to a bold new city. The judge would tell you that, for all her legal accomplishments, the kids are her most treasured legacy. And I think she is exactly what this profession needs—leaders who value family most of all. ☺