

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Audrie Lawton-Evans, who is a Democratic candidate for Harris County Attorney in the March primary. Audrie, thank you very much for speaking with me today. Let me start by asking why you're running for this office.

Audrie Lawton Evans

Well, thank you, Charles. Thank you for having me. I am excited or been excited about the opportunity to sit down and talk with you. I'm running for County Attorney because, or Harris County Attorney, because I am ready or I am the only candidate who would be ready on day one. I know that the political climate today calls for a fighter, right? I am going to fight.

I'm going to fight President Trump. I will fight Greg Abbott. I will fight Ken Paxton. I will fight for the residents of Harris County. I think that it's right now we cannot sit back quietly and watch what our government is doing to us as residents in this county. The County Attorney's office is so important because it actually touches all aspects of Harris County and the administration of the county.

I believe that I am ready on day one because I have the experience. I have the experience as an attorney. I've practiced law for 23 years. I have an actual trial experience and have tried over 50 cases to a jury. I have the experience as a manager. I've worked the job before I took office as a judge. I worked as in-house counsel for two companies where I managed staff of over 50 employees. That's important because the County Attorney's office has over 300 employees. You need someone in this position who has managerial experience.

I also have the experience most recently as a judge. I think that my judicial experience makes me uniquely qualified in this pool of candidates because I have sat over cases that involve the county on many different levels. I'm a civil court judge and I have been for the last five years. I believe that will also help me understand the areas of practice of the county's office. In many respects, the County Attorney is the people's lawyer and the County Attorney's office is the people's law firm.

Charles Kuffner

Thank you. Thank you for giving me some background. That was going to be my next question. Let me talk a little bit more about two aspects of your experience. First, in the time that you have been a county court judge, what would you say has been your main accomplishments? What are you most proud of for that time that you've been a judge?

Audrie Lawton Evans

Well, one, I would just like to say on behalf of all of the judges in Harris County that our judges are doing a phenomenal job. You've heard a lot in the news and the media about the judges, both civil and criminal, I guess all types. But I'm here to tell you that my colleagues are showing up for work and we're doing the actual work that needs to be done to try to get to the root cause of the issues.

As a county civil judge, I've handled cases up to \$325,000 in disputes. That may include car accident cases, contract disputes. As far as the County Attorney's office is concerned, I sit and handle cases involving eminent domain, which the County Attorney's office has a section where they practice in that area. I sit over the appeals as appellate court for all of the JP courts in our county. There are 16 JP courts. There are four, well now five, Harris County civil courts at law. That brings us to one of our greatest accomplishments as the civil court. I am currently the administrative judge of all of the county civil courts at law. This is my second term in that capacity.

And we are proud, or I am proud, that under this, I guess this last year, we were actually able to get approval for a fifth court. Now, I believe we have not had a court, a new court on the county court level since 1970s, in the 70s. We have now, through the help of legislature, through the help of commissioner's court, we were able to secure a Harris County civil court number five, which if you follow politics, the commissioners just have appointed our newest judge and that's Judge Jermaine Thomas as the first judge of Harris County civil court at law number five. So that's my greatest accomplishment so far.

Charles Kuffner

And you also spent some time in the attorney general's office before you became a county court judge. Tell me a little bit about what you did in the AG's office. Since they, you know, they get headlines for big political cases, but they do a lot of bread and butter type works. What did you do with the AG?

Audrie Lawton Evans

Absolutely. And it's funny because I kind view the County Attorney's office as a mini AG's office, right? There's a lot of, if you look, if you were to go on the websites, you'll see a lot of parallels as to what the AG's office handles and what the County Attorney's office handles.

And so my first job, I was a baby attorney. My first job out was with the civil litigation department. And I worked defending the different agencies. So we defended DPS, we defended Texas, the prison systems, right? So TDCJ. And that was one of the most fulfilling jobs that I had in that I hit the ground running.

That's where I got a lot of my trial experience from the AG's office and the special prosecution unit. So I traveled all over the state of Texas. I've probably been to every prison unit in Texas. And we would defend the COs, the wardens from complaints that were filed, like civil rights complaints filed by the inmates. That was my first job. So out of that job, I became licensed in all of the federal courts. So now I hold licensure in the Eastern, Western, Southern District of Texas, as well as the Fifth Court Circuit of Appeals.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. And give me your high level view. How is the County Attorney's office functioning now? What are they doing right? What are they doing that they could do better or differently? What would be your vision for this office if you are elected?

Audrie Lawton Evans

Well, first let me say that I want to give a tremendous kudos to Christian Menefee, who is the outgoing County Attorney. He has done such a great job. I went back and did my research a little bit for this interview and looked at his interview with you a few years ago. And listened to some of the things that he promised, and I'd say that he's delivered on that.

We are now seeing a more active County Attorney's office on many different levels, right? And so what I want to do is expand upon that. I want to keep our presence in the community. If you've seen and follow on Facebook and Instagram, the County Attorney's office is going to civic meetings. They're going to club meetings. They're meeting people where they are to let them know the services of the County Attorney's office. As we've seen, the County Attorney has had to get involved in defending our rights. I don't know if we ever would have thought that a President of the United States would specifically target our county or our folks, as well as some of our state leadership.

But you're able to see how the County Attorney can step in, right? We have a litigation department that does affirmative litigation or is able to step out and actually sue on behalf of the residents, as well as defend. So I think you're going to see a lot more of that happening.

One area which I would love to expand on is the creation of an appellate section. As you see, and most residents now can see, whether or not you know a lot about the law, right, is that cases can take an extreme amount of time, right, as they go up the pipeline. And so currently, as we sit, the County Attorney's office deals with other firms that may, you know, if we form out some of the litigation as it goes into the appellate sector, but what a tremendous opportunity, right, to create or enhance our involvement in appellate law by creating an appellate section.

Another thing that I think is just a kind of quiet jewel that the County Attorneys has as well is our consumer protection division. There is currently a consumer protection division and a hotline and all of those things, and I want to launch a, you know, a huge, I guess, campaign, right, to let people know that they can bring their consumer complaints, especially in a place like Harris County, right, where we've got, you know, natural disasters. And after that, we have to be on the lookout for price gouging, want to be on the lookout for scams, which are at an all-time high, right, with AI and technology.

And so I think those are areas in which the County Attorney's office can do a little bit more, right, to be a resource to the residents, but expand upon the actual divisions that are already in place.

Charles Kuffner

One of the things that I remember Christian Menefee talking about when I first interviewed him for the 2020 campaign was his desire to use the County Attorney's office to pursue environmental matters, to go after polluters, to protect neighborhoods and, well, the county at large from, you know, the effects of environmental damage. You know, how well do you think he's done at that, and what's your vision for that aspect of the job?

Audrie Lawton Evans

Yeah, well, I think he's done, you know, I think he's done a great job, right. We've got environmental issues that, you know, that's one area to where it's not, it's hard to look into a crystal ball, right, and tell what is going to be the issues coming forward, right. I think if you see that, and I'm talking about this now, it's about these data centers that are popping up, right, and certainly in a place like Texas where we've got a lot of businesses, right, running here to set up shop, you know, the effects of data centers are something that, you know, we're still going to have to kind of wait and see, right, but we've seen in some areas, some states where the data centers use up a lot of the water. Data centers have had effects on the water in different areas.

So, you know, one of the things that we constantly have to do, right, is stay abreast of the issues, making sure that we know what, or I guess we talk to people who are experts in those areas so that we know even ahead of time as we're planning out what could be some of the ramifications for the construction of things of that nature. We've seen with the concrete batches. We've seen with the cancer clusters, you know, as well, and so I think when you're dealing with environmental, you're dealing with not only the law, right, you're dealing with the ordinances and things of that nature that the County Attorney can certainly help with the enforcement of certain ordinances or requirements in order to come in and do business in our neighborhoods.

But you're also looking at making sure that the community, right, and the trusted messengers in the community are able to, you have to keep that line of communication open because we are in a sense waiting for someone to give us the information or let us know what's happening. And so I think with technology, I think with campaigns getting out more education, we can actually in real time, you know, kind of see where there's some reporting mechanism. If there's a legal dumping happening in your neighborhood, we've got to bring in the experts to talk to the community so they can understand all that's involved when it comes to that new development that's coming into their communities.

And so, you know, it's kind of one of those things where it's a huge burden, you know, for the County Attorney, obviously, but you've got to figure out a way around that, right. And I think that by enlisting the people, by enlisting the residents, by having partnerships with businesses, by having partnerships with schools that have, you know, the research capabilities, you know, A&M and Prairie View and TSU and U of H. I mean, we have this wonderful, I guess, network of schools and experts and people that are in place that can help us with this. And so I think it's just, you know, on one level, it just needs to be more comprehensive. And we really need to understand the root causes.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Obviously, Harris County's attorney office has had a lot of work to do in the area of voting rights and defending Harris County's election process. We are very much a target for the state and to a lesser but still significant degree, the federal government.

Because we're a big county, you know, we've got a lot of voters of color, a lot of Democratic voters. And unfortunately, we've had a few missteps in our election administration in years past. But also, we've been targeted for trying to innovate.

I mean, think about all the things Chris Hollins did during the 2020 election, that the next legislature went and outlawed. And, you know, we play defense because we have to, it would be nice to be able to go on the attack on some things. But you run into the risk that, you know, between the Fifth Circuit and the Supreme Court, they might not only rule against you, but they might rule it in such a way that you can't pursue that line of reasoning ever again.

So I guess this is a long winded way of asking, what's your take on election, defending Harris County's voting rights, individually, collectively? What's your approach going to be?

Audrie Lawton Evans

I think that the approach is going to be a vigorous one, right? I don't think that we have the luxury of a wait and see type approach. I think though, when you're saying that, what does that actually mean?

It means that, you know, as a County Attorney, there's different roles, right? And so one of the roles of the County Attorney is to defend and advise, right, the different entities that make up Harris County. And so that includes our county clerk, that includes our tax assessor, right?

And so I think one part will be making sure that the County Attorney's office is a resource to both of those offices, and by extension, the Commissioner's Court, to make sure that the laws and that we're in compliance first, right? As with any attorney, I always tell attorneys, and certainly when you come to court, you hear this adage of, you don't put a witness on the stand unless you know what they're going to say, right? And so, you know, that's one of the things that is a function behind the scenes of the County Attorney's office, is to assess the situation, right?

And, you know, if the situation is one where we have done nothing wrong, right, will be to first, obviously, go up the chain of command, but also think outside the box, right? I would never and don't intend to try to limit our officials when they are trying to think outside the box, especially in an effort to increase voter participation, right? I think that that's so important because people can be on different sides of things, but you should never be on a different side of increasing voter participation, right?

And so, I think that, you know, there are different tools that we can definitely use, you know, in, of course, affirmative litigation by actually filing suit, you know, filing amicus briefs. I think also that one of the most effective things that I don't think people are really talking about is collaborations amongst counties, right, and states. If you have seen, you know, some of the most successful litigation that has taken on the Trump administration has been, you know, a collective force of AGs across the country, right?

Same thing can happen here in Texas. We've got Dallas, you know, we've got San Antonio, we've got Houston, and I think that we've got to collaborate more with the County Attorney's offices all across the state so that, you know, there is strength in numbers. There is, there are resources that we can all tap into because that's what we're up against.

It's David and Goliath, right? And, you know, and so we've got to figure out a way to pull our resources together to create a very strong and consistent message, right? And that is that we are going to protect everyone's right to vote in Harris County and in the state of Texas.

Charles Kuffner

And we also have to talk about immigration, in particular, immigration enforcement and ICE and deployment of National Guard troops. We just got a ruling from the Supreme Court that blocked, you know, the deployment of Texas National Guard to Chicago for whatever stupid reason they had in mind for that. You know, I mean, immigration enforcement is more of a criminal matter, but obviously there are many legal issues and our County Attorney has been involved in that fight and I'd like to hear what your plans are for it.

Audrie Lawton Evans

Right. I mean, you know, and to your point about it touching or, you know, kind of going into the County Attorney's purview, you know, you're right. Like, you know, things start off, quote, unquote, as a criminal offense, even if one, we can use that word kind of loosely as well, right? Because many of the people, unfortunately, that are being picked up do not have a criminal record. Okay.

Charles Kuffner

And so I should say, I meant criminal most in that it was law enforcement that gets involved.

Audrie Lawton Evans

Absolutely. Absolutely. What you've said is important because, you know, people, there are people out there who still think that they do, right? And that has been the narrative that has fueled this, right? And so I think first, you know, again, that education component, the idea that you arm people, right? You arm the residents with information so that they can, you know, fight against individually if they are ever stopped, you know, the correct things to say and do, right?

But also I think a big part of that is being able to advise businesses and advise, you know, our entities, our Harris County entities about what I can and cannot do, right? On Harris County property or, you know, because we are a huge employer as well, right? And so, you know, you've got to think about all of those things.

What happens when somebody comes to someone's place of employment to try to pick them up? Or is there a duty to disclose information to an ICE agent if you're an employer about where your employee lives? And so I think, you know, one, again, that's going to be another area which we could work with other counties, other entities, other bodies to try to come up with an organized response.

I think also part of that is calling to the carpet some of these other, you know, entities, you know, who are saying that, you know, we haven't even gotten a clear picture of whether or not, you know, we're cooperating with them, right? And so, you know, I think that's part of it as well is pressing for the truth and being a truth seeker through this all.

Charles Kuffner

And, I mean, you've outlined a pretty comprehensive vision for what you want to do, and that includes doing some things that aren't currently being done. All of these things take resources, and Harris County is in, you know, I wouldn't say financial trouble, but certainly is in a more constrained position than it was, you know, say four years, four or five years ago. So, you know, how are you going to pitch your more expansive vision to commissioners court and get them to buy into your idea that we do need to spend more on the County Attorney's office to do these things? What's your plan for that?

Audrie Lawton Evans

I think, you know, one is establishing and keeping good relations with each commissioner and, you know, and the county judge, right? I think that the other part is that because Christian has done a good job is that, you know, you're actually able to see the dollars in action, and you're able to actually see the vision per se, I guess, played out, right? I think, you know, the creation of the appellate section would actually save dollars.

You know, if we're currently farming some of those cases out, and I will tell you this, that civil litigation is expensive. It really is. And so, I think that that's an area where we'd actually pay for itself or save the dollars in that those will be cases we could keep in house.

We would have a team of attorneys that work as they do, but it's definitely a difference than billable hours per se. I think, you know, for other things, as far as the consumer section, you know, I think that social media, I think a website, I think, you know, all of the different platforms are relatively, I don't want to say cheap ways, but relatively inexpensive ways, right, to engage the public. And so, you know, I think that a lot of the changes or some of the tweaks, rather, that I would be advocating for would not be as expensive as you would think.

I don't have all of the dollars, you know, the numbers before me, but I think thinking creatively, looking at areas in which we can save money would be the way that I would convince the commissioners to follow my plan.

Charles Kuffner

Well, I think one thing that would make your life easier and might perhaps require fewer resources to be expended on all of these things would be to have less antagonistic governments at the federal and state level. And to get there, that's going to require electing more Democrats, very simply. What are you going to do as a candidate and as a person to help get more Democrats elected up and down the ballot in Harris County and in Texas?

Audrie Lawton Evans

Right. Well, this is a question I love, right, because I could talk about myself all day long, but we really need to rise to the occasion and understand that this is quite literally the most important election of our lifetime, right, that's coming up. And so, you know, I always look at how do we engage new voters?

And, you know, that's part of part of me outside of the political, or I guess the candidate or the judge, right, has always been interested in the grassroots of the Democratic Party. I served as chair, I mean, as the chair of Houston Black American Democrats. I have served as the secretary of the Harris County Democratic Party. And so I believe in, I also believe that it can be fun. I, you know, try to engage people where they are. I plan on being a candidate who's going to be out in the community, right.

I plan on listening more than I talk. I think that's one area in which Democrats, you know, we need to listen. There are groups of people out there who feel like they are not being heard for whatever reason, right. And so we've got to do more to engage those people as well as bring back people to the fold, right. And so how do we do that?

You know, I'm, I'm leaning into my community. I'm leaning into, you know, I've got, we've got a message for women. This will, this race itself will be this first, either way you cut it, right, there is going to be a woman County Attorney for the first time in our history, right. And so, you know, it's a tremendous opportunity to engage people who that matters to, right. It matters to me. It matters to my daughters. It should matter to your daughter, right.

I always say that because your daughter and I, we have the same name, right. And so I always remember that. But, you know, we've got, we've got chances all the way up and down the ballot to make history and be a part of history where the tide is changing.

You know, I, I teach federal government at Lone Star and last year, I was very, or this last year, you know, rather, it was very difficult to teach that class, right. Because I'm telling them about all these things that are idealistic, right. You know, or I guess until now, I thought they were reality, right.

The checks and the balances, the three branches of government, you know, all of those things that sound great, but they're all being tested right now, right. And so, you know, as a history major, which I am, I think about how interesting that is to live in these times where we're actually seeing that play out, right. And so the only option that we have as a people is to come together and to demand more, right.

And to demand that our Constitution, which has served us this well, this far, this long, right, is still in place and intact. And so I think that, you know, as we always struggled for a message as the Democratic Party, we've got many messages now, it's just time to get out there and spread it.

Charles Kuffner

Well, in order for you to make that history as the first woman to serve as Harris County Attorney, you got to win the nomination first. And you had you do have an opponent in the primary. And so when people go to vote in the Democratic primary this March, why should they vote to make you the nominee for Harris County Attorney and not your opponent?

Audrie Lawton Evans

Again, I am ready on day one. We don't have time to wait, right. And I think that my experience, again, is where the difference lies. I have actual trial experience. I've been in courtrooms. I've tried cases. I've tried 50 jury trials, more than 50 jury trials to conclusion, right. I believe that I have the managerial experience. I have worked in county, well, state government, probably half of my career, right. So I understand what it's like to be a state employee. I understand the workload. I understand how to make efficient government run, right.

And then as a judge, I believe I have the demeanor. That's something you also need, right, the demeanor. As well as the experience of actually handling these types of cases that come in and out of the County Attorney's office.

You have to look at the County Attorney's office handles many things, right. So I believe my education, my demeanor, all of those things, and my trial experience makes me the best candidate for this position.

Charles Kuffner

Alright. Audrie Lawton, thank you for speaking with me today

Audrie Lawton Evans

Thank you.