

As a youngster, while his peers worshipped athletes as their heroes, Joe Harroz idolized presidents, senators and others dedicated to public service. Still, his own career plan was to follow in his father's footsteps and become a physician. But a close-up view of the inside workings of politics, law and government and a challenge from a friend changed his course and led him down a path of public service in his home state.

Harroz, OU's general counsel and University vice president, attributes his successful legal career to family members and friends who were also role models. His father, the youngest of eight first-generation Lebanese-American siblings and the first in his family to go to college, became one of Oklahoma's most respected doctors. Many of a close-knit group of friends from his days in Washington as a legislative aide to then-Senator David L. Boren, including CIA Director George Tenet, went on to illustrious careers in government, politics and law. And finally, Harroz credits Boren himself with showing him the way to public service and how to best serve Oklahoma.

After graduating from Oklahoma City's Putnam City North High School, Harroz attended OU as a pre-med major. He was accepted to OU's medical school, but, after a summer internship in Boren's U.S. Senate office, he became enamored with both Washington and government. A friend dared him to take the LSAT—the Law School Admission Test—insisting that it was more difficult than its medical counterpart, the MCAT. Harroz accepted the challenge. A high score on the test prompted him to apply to law school. Still torn between medicine and law, he mentally tossed a coin and returned to Washington to attend Georgetown University Law Center.

Harroz also went to work in Boren's office and, even before his law school graduation, became his chief legislative aide. "I was involved in issues like campaign finance reform, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Leave Act and the Civil



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Strong family ties and the opportunity to make a difference lured Joe Harroz, left, back to Oklahoma and the University. Samia, his graphic artist wife of two years, is a partner in a Norman serigraph business with three other OU art graduates.

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says Boren. “While he is still young in years, he is one of the most capable and effective attorneys that I have ever observed. He not only has an incredible capacity for hard work and a high energy level, he is a person who has totally dedicated himself to the University.”

The job of OU's general counsel is not what most people think. While many universities and other state agencies oversee

Rights Act of 1991. I worked on international trade agreements and traveled to China and Chile,” says Harroz. “It was an amazing experience.”

He left Boren's Senate staff in 1993 to pursue opportunities in the private sector. Two of his three offers were for high-profile, high-paying jobs on the East Coast. The third was with the Oklahoma City law firm of Crowe & Dunlevy. Uncertain, Harroz sought Boren's counsel.

“He asked me what I wanted to do, and I told him I wanted to make a difference,” Harroz recalls. “I was certain he'd tell me to take one of the high-powered jobs. Instead, he pointed out that, as an Oklahoman, I should return to the state and try to give something back. So I went to Crowe & Dunlevy.”

The decision ultimately led him back to Boren and OU. Boren called Harroz in late 1994 and invited him to dinner in Seminole. “He wanted to ask my advice about whether he should leave the Senate and accept the position as president of OU. I told him I thought he should remain in the Senate. I

was certain I had convinced him with my persuasive arguments. A day and a half later, he announced that he was taking the OU job,” says Harroz with a laugh.

Boren says getting Harroz to join him was a priority. “One of my first actions when I learned that I would be president of OU was to ask Joe to leave a promising career in private practice to come to serve the University.” Harroz came on board as vice president of executive affairs, then was named the University's general counsel.

“Joe is a person of tremendous ability,”

a variety of legal matters they contract out to private law firms, Harroz's office handles the bulk of the University's legal work. Not only is he responsible for the legal affairs of OU's three campuses and its Board of Regents, he is also chief legal officer for Cameron University in Lawton and Rogers State University in Claremore, which are governed by the OU Board of Regents.

"The fact that we pretty much do it all is part of what attracted me to the position. It benefits OU because, as insiders, we're sensitive to the inner workings of the institution that no outside law firm could possibly know about," Harroz says. "The key to being a decent general counsel is knowing what you don't know and going elsewhere to find that expertise, whether it's from inside the counsel's office or from an outside resource."

Harroz's team of seven attorneys is assigned to trial work, transactional work or a combination of both. The explosion in information technology development and implementation has made transactional legal work a major focus of the general counsel's office.

"What we do isn't what most lawyers think of as transactional work. We don't just draft documents," Harroz explains. "Our job is to help make things happen. We need to be creative in our approaches and open to new ways of doing things." One project he is working to make happen is the National Weather Center, to be constructed on OU's south campus.

As both general counsel and a University vice president, his almost inexhaustible list of duties also includes advising the Board of Regents and the presidents of the three universities, drafting policies and conferring with panels that hear disciplin-

ary actions and grievances. He is the person to whom both the University's chief compliance officer and the director of OU's Department of Public Safety report. He also volunteers as an adjunct professor at the College of Law, where he teaches one class a semester.

G.T. Blankenship, long-time Oklahoma City lawyer, banker and former Oklahoma attorney general, has served on OU's Board of Regents since 1990. He calls Harroz "almost Superman as general counsel, he's so good. He protects the University's interests as well as or better than anyone."

That may be due, at least in part, to Harroz's focus on being proactive rather than reactive. "I spend a large part of my day answering phone calls from people throughout the University system who have legal questions. I try to answer those questions within 24 hours and solve the problem on the front end, so that it doesn't escalate into something bigger," he says. "When someone comes to me with a problem in the morning and I can resolve it by the end of the day, I feel like I'm really doing my job."

Harroz says he couldn't succeed in his job without the top-notch team he has assembled. "They could all make more money somewhere else. They're all amazing lawyers. But they understand the mission of OU and that is what drives them."

That mission is also what has kept Harroz at OU as well. "What the University does is fundamentally important. Our products are not widgets or cars. Our products are the leaders of tomorrow and the research that propels our society forward. Absent religion and family, nothing is more important," he says.

Family and faith are big parts of who he is. He met his wife

of two years, Samia, a graphic artist, at church. Before they met, he says, his life was focused around his work. "Samia changed my entire perspective. She's the greatest thing that ever happened to me." Both are very close to their families, seeing them frequently and even spending vacations with all or parts of each clan. Last summer, 12 members of the Harrozes' extended family, all of Lebanese descent, traveled to Lebanon.

Harroz does not look back and wonder what might have been had he opted for one of those high-profile Beltway jobs instead of returning to Oklahoma. "The University is in a renaissance. Right now is a wonderful moment in time, and OU is a wonderful place to be. But it's just the beginning. We have unlimited potential."

—DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI



Robert Taylor

Joe Harroz, standing at left with Laura Palk, starts each week with an 8:30 a.m. organizational meeting of his seven-member legal staff. Seated from left are Susan Seamans, Kurt Ockershauser and Fred Gipson. Other staff members are Jill Fisher and Sally Garrison.