

Roger Williams University

DOCS@RWU

Life of the Law School (1993-)

Archives & Law School History

4-2024

Changemakers: Terrence Haas : Juris Doctorate : Adventures In Law

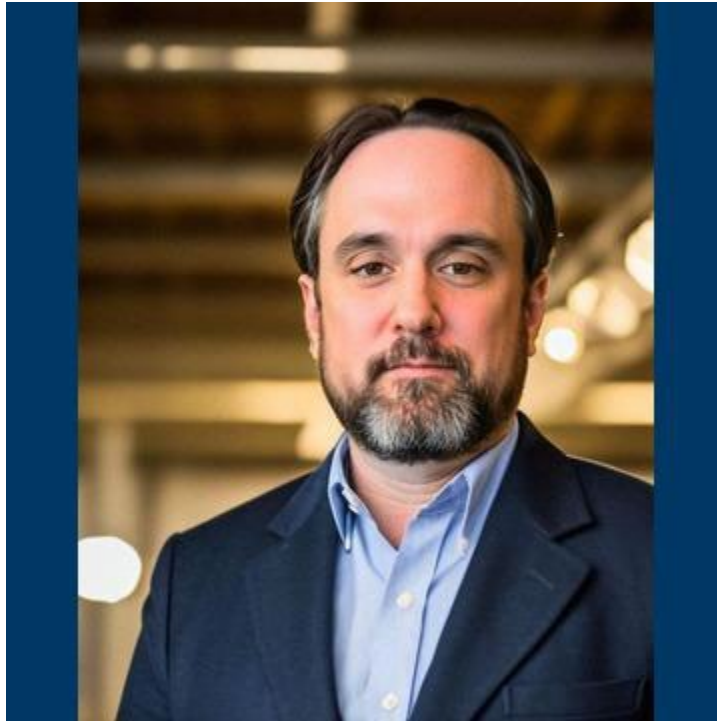
Roger Williams University School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life



Part of the [Courts Commons](#), [Judges Commons](#), [Legal Education Commons](#), [Legal Profession Commons](#), and the [State and Local Government Law Commons](#)

Changemakers: Terrence Haas: Juris Doctorate: Adventures in Law



Judge Terrence Haas L'07, Chief Public Defender for the State of Alaska

Terrence Haas, RWU Law Class of 2007

[Juris Doctor](#)

Terrence Haas L'07 is an adventurer.

In his twenties, he lived off the grid in rural northern Michigan in a shelter with no electricity or water.

After law school, he moved to Alaska to become a public defender in a town outside of the state's road system. In September 2023, Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy appointed Haas as the Alaska Public Defender.

But for anyone who believes the best option for a recent law school graduate is a stable position in private practice, Haas's biggest adventure wasn't moving from the Ocean State to The Last Frontier. It was taking a chance as a new lawyer supporting a young family on a career in public interest law. Today, he encourages new lawyers to consider a similar path.

Off the grid

Haas was born in California and raised in Indiana. As a college student in Michigan, he moved into the woods. “I don’t think it was that conscious of a decision,” he recalls. “It was just kind of a thing that people were doing in that part of the world.”

That adventure ended with another adventure: the birth of Haas’s first child. At that time, he moved back to Indiana and completed an undergraduate degree in philosophy at Purdue University.

On to law school

Haas had previously worked in group homes for disabled adults. He liked the experience and also realized that he wanted to pursue advocacy as a career. This led him to Roger Williams University School of Law. He enjoyed being an active law student, serving as the Editor in Chief of the Law Review and clerking for Judge Mary Lisi of the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island.

Although he had the credentials to go to a large firm after graduation, he recalls, “firm work just wasn’t calling my name.” He clerked for then-Chief Justice Frank Williams of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. During a work-related event, he struck up a conversation with the son of another justice who was visiting from out of town and happened to be a public defender in Alaska.

“It’s another adventure and obviously, I have some intent for adventures,” Haas recalls. “So, after thinking about it and mulling it over, I thought, ‘Well, you know, what’s the worst that can happen?’”



A new adventure

Haas and his family moved to Bethel, a community of around six thousand residents in western Alaska. He recalls that he was “learning the job at the same time that I was trying to learn the culture. There were bumps in the road to be sure. But ultimately, the people there are very, very patient, kind, [and] understanding.”

Eventually, Haas became the head of the local public defender’s office and then a regional supervisor. After about ten years, he began to consider applying for an open judgeship. He was happy as a public defender but knew there was a shortage of judges, particularly ones who knew the communities.

According to Haas, “I had lived in the community by then for about ten years, and I thought that would be extremely helpful to have somebody who was the judge and who, taking that leadership role, , was from the community and knew the community and wanted to be part of the community.”

After a merit-based selection process, Haas was appointed by the governor as a judge of the Superior Court for Bethel and then the presiding judge on Alaska’s Fourth Judicial District.

About three years later, Haas was selected to the public defender position out of around a dozen candidates and appointed by the governor. He officially takes the position in December 2023.



A tricky business

As the supervisor of the state’s approximately one-hundred public defenders, Haas is eager to impart to a new generation of lawyers what it means to be a public defender.

“Public defense is a tricky business,” he observes. At its best, public defense means helping people in need. At its worst, a public defender’s office can be merely a stamp of approval on a broken process, ensuring that it meets Constitutional muster but not seriously fighting for clients’ rights. Haas says, “A good public defender often gums up the works.”

Haas encourages law students to think about careers outside the norm, noting that there are more ways than ever to make public interest financially viable for new lawyers. “I would say to law students now they don’t have to run off and do anything adventurous, necessarily,” he advises, “but you should think of your career creatively.”

Haas also puts in a plug for his own office, along with a challenge: “You could come to Alaska and be a public defender...if you’re a great lawyer.”