The Journal of Appellate Practice and Process

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 17

2003

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Christina M. Tchen

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I sat down to Thanksgiving dinner in 1991 with more than hunger pangs rumbling my stomach. The next day I was off to Washington to make final preparations for my first (and, to date, only) argument before the United States Supreme Court. I fondly recall the evening as a "girlfriends" Thanksgiving: Preparing for a Supreme Court argument is a single-minded exercise, so I did not travel to see family, and my three-year-old son was already with my ex-husband for the next five days. For this Thanksgiving dinner, I was with my Chicago girlfriends who were also far from their families.

There could have been no better support group for me that evening. I was not good company. I was nearing the end of several weeks of intensive, monastic focus on the case and the body of law at issue in our argument before the Court. I was headed out of town for what I knew would be one of the most significant one-hour events of my life. I hadn't thought of anything else in days.

The case was difficult. We represented the State of Illinois in a case where we had represented its Department of Children and Family Services below. DCFS had been enjoined by the district court, and the other side had prevailed again at the Seventh Circuit, so we went before the Supreme Court as two-time losers. And although we were buoyed by the Court's grant of certiorari, we knew that our chances of winning were slim.

I had argued our appeal before the Seventh Circuit, but the Supreme Court was quite another matter. At the time, I was only an associate at the firm—an associate who was up for partnership that year, but still just an associate. I was closest to the case and the evidence, however, so the partner on the matter,

* Ms. Tchen is a partner in the Chicago office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP.

former federal district judge Susan Getzendanner, recommended that I argue the case, an act of support and generosity for which I am forever grateful.

Many other lawyers were similarly generous during my preparation. I found that a Supreme Court argument is a unique, universally revered, event among lawyers. When told that I was preparing for my first Supreme Court argument, everyone seemed ready to offer assistance and encouragement. The lawyers and support staff at my firm labored through long hours as we briefed the case (which was done on an accelerated schedule, as we were appealing a preliminary injunction). My other clients tolerated my temporary absence from their cases while I devoted myself solely to preparing for the argument. Several partners at the firm, and busy lawyers from many other firms, read the briefs and put me through a series of moot arguments. I am especially grateful to those who persevered through my first few attempts, and who were kind but firm in their commentary. An enduring memory of that time is of being embraced by so many colleagues and friends, all giving of themselves to help me do my best.

To alleviate the general shock at being before the Court, I made an advance trip to Washington shortly after the session began that October, just to watch a full day's schedule of arguments and to get a feel for the courtroom. This was my first trip to the Court (I confess that I took the White House tour, rather than the Court tour, during my ninth-grade field trip to Washington), and I discovered that just walking up those steps and into the chamber takes your breath away. On that trip I found my heart beating out of my chest—that heart-in-your-throat feeling. All I could think as I walked into the courtroom was "Thank God, *this* is not my argument day." By that afternoon, while now used to being in the courtroom, I was filled with anxiety again. Having watched the active give-and-take that is a Supreme Court argument, I understood that there are no cold panels at the Supreme Court.

So that's what led up to my Thanksgiving dinner. I was out of touch with the real world, exhausted, and—yes—a little scared. But you can trust your girlfriends to surround you with warm support, and yet dish enough dirt to keep you well grounded. It was a welcome relief from discussing standards of

review, statutory interpretation, and constitutional limits on authority. Instead, I was grilled mercilessly about what I planned to wear.

The next day I left for Washington, and one more moot court. This one was organized by the National Association of Attorneys General, as I was arguing as a Special Assistant Attorney General on behalf of the State of Illinois. Once again, I am grateful for the kindness of strangers, experienced Supreme Court practitioners who gave up their holiday weekend to help a novice prepare for her first appearance.

I recall that final weekend as a rising crescendo of adrenaline. The nagging fear is that you will be asked a penetrating question about the footnote in a relevant opinion that you skimmed but did not thoroughly probe. This is especially unnerving when you are, like me, decidedly not an academic. I count myself among those who endured law school as a means to becoming a lawyer, and who revels in the practical issues and concerns of representing clients. Preparing for my Supreme Court argument was probably the most sustained academic endeavor in which I have ever engaged, and I now more fully understand the allure of drilling deep into the nuances of every opinion by every Justice on a specific line of authority. There is a sense of accomplishment when you realize you can discuss the thinking of each member of the Court, much like the sense of mastery that comes of learning to hear the difference between a composition by Bach and one by Beethoven.

And then suddenly it was Monday morning. We were the first argument. The Clerk ushered us in, and kindly gave us the basic pointers. Again, everyone in the legal system seemed focused on preparing us to do our best. Being first meant that we were able to position ourselves at counsel table, try out the podium, and settle down before the Court entered. If you are second, which Solicitor General Kenneth Starr was that day, you have to hurry yourself to the table as the first lawyers leave; everyone waits for you. Once again, I thought, "Thank God that isn't me."

The most striking feature of the courtroom is how intimate it is, while carrying all the imposing ceremony one would expect of such a venue. Standing at the lectern places you only a few feet from the Chief Justice, with the other eight Justices arrayed

around you. It is clearly designed to foster the best attributes of a good oral argument—the intense, intellectual challenge of testing the limits of the legal principles at issue in the case.

I was first up. As I have learned from experience, the key to oral argument is to get the first sentences out of your mouth just so you know that you can still speak and think. Then, if you're lucky, training, preparation, and instinct will take over and carry you through. I had rehearsed my opening—and my whole argument—over and over that last weekend. In a borrowed office, in my hotel room, in the shower. So even as my throat began clutching when the moment came, the words appeared.

It took two sentences before Justice Scalia threw me my first curve, and we were off my outline and on to the Justices' questions. They came quickly and from all sides. And at some point, to my amazement, it began to feel more like a lively dinner-table conversation than an argument before the highest court in the land.

The time flew. We had only thirty minutes, and we had given ten to the Solicitor General's Office, as the federal government had joined our side of the issue. Twenty minutes is barely an essay's worth of exposition. It is the smallest of fractions of a career, and yet those minutes remain among the most important of any lawyer's lifetime.

I was fortunate that day. The argument went well: I was able to make the points we had viewed as critical, I had answers for the Justices' questions. And four months later, I received a call from the Clerk, telling me the Court had issued a ruling in our favor.[1] In a coincidence that still seems too good to be true, that call came exactly one week before my firm was making its annual partnership decisions. I did make partner, and so my Supreme Court argument and my admission to the partnership are forever intertwined in my memory.

My recollection of the entire fall leading up to the argument remains fresh to this day, eleven years later. I have often told friends that there are few experiences that live up to expectation, but a Supreme Court argument is one that does. I recall the sense of stepping into history. I recall the satisfaction of engaging in a pure exercise of intellectual challenge. I recall the support and

1. *Suter v. Artist M.*, 503 U.S. 347 (1992).

generosity of my colleagues in the law. And, of course, I remember my girlfriends, whose encouragement, affection, and fashion advice helped me make it through.