

Northwestern State University
College of Business & Technology
Continuing Legal Education Seminar, May 9, 2025
Presenter Biographies

Session 1: Ethics

Associate Justice Scott J. Crichton. Having completed a ten-year term as Associate Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, Scott Crichton is Of Counsel for the Law Offices of Mary Watson Smith, L.L.C., a firm focused on appellate advocacy in complex areas of civil law. He also serves clients through Scott J. Crichton Law, LLC operating offices in Shreveport and New Orleans; he is both a mediator and arbitrator with the Perry Dampf Dispute Solutions.

While on the State's high court, Scott chaired the court's Executive Committee as well as the Louisiana Judicial College; he was also the court's statutory designee to the Louisiana Sheriffs' Executive Management Institute Board. He is the recipient of the 2022 Judge Benjamin Jones Judges in the Classroom Award and the 2024 President's Award from the Louisiana Judicial College Board of Governors in recognition of his years of service to judicial education.

For five years, as an adjunct faculty member of Tulane Law School, he taught two 3L courses, Advanced Appellate Advocacy and Contemporary Issues in Legal Ethics, publishing coursebooks on each subject. He has also served on the faculty for the LSU Law Center Trial Advocacy Program.

Prior to his election to the Supreme Court, Scott served 24 years as a judge with the First Judicial District Court (Shreveport/Caddo Parish), presiding in both the civil and criminal divisions; from 1980-1990, Scott had an extensive civil and criminal litigation practice.

Scott credits his parents, Tom (owner, hardware store/cattle rancher) and Mary (homemaker and life master, bridge), with teaching and instilling in him the virtues of humility, education, and a commitment of service to community, all of which have guided him throughout life. Scott, age 70, and his wife, Susie, have two sons, both of whom are lawyers, and are enthusiastically expecting twin granddaughters soon!

Associate Justice Cade R. Cole was elected without opposition to the Louisiana Supreme Court in 2025, representing the Third District of Western Louisiana. Previously, he served as Louisiana's first state and local tax judge, overseeing high-stakes tax disputes and leading procedural fairness reforms. A graduate of DeQuincy High School, Tulane University, and Tulane Law School, he excelled academically, earning multiple CALI Awards. After clerking for Justice Jeannette T. Knoll, he practiced complex business and tax litigation in Lake Charles and served as appellate counsel in diverse cases. A trained

mediator from Pepperdine's Straus Institute, he successfully mediated over 1,500 cases and was instrumental in expediting over 10,000 Hurricane Laura lawsuits.

Justice Cole has held various public service roles, including assistant district attorney, city attorney, and city magistrate. He is a board-certified tax law specialist and has chaired the Louisiana Board of Legal Specialization's Tax Law Advisory Commission. His leadership in tax law reform earned Louisiana recognition as the nation's "Most Improved State" by the Council of State Taxation. Active in the legal community, he has served in leadership roles with the Louisiana State Bar Association, the Federal Bar Association, and judicial selection committees. He was honored with the LSBA's Outstanding Service Award for his work in indigent defense funding.

Beyond the law, he supports McNeese student-athletes through the Ranch Collective. Justice Cole and his wife, Rebekah, a former chemical engineer and active school volunteer, reside in Lake Charles with their four children.

Session 2: Mastering Appellate Court Practice and Procedure in Louisiana

Chief Judge Elizabeth Pickett is a highly respected figure in the legal community, known for her extensive experience and unwavering commitment to public service. She graduated from Tulane University with a Bachelor of Arts in History in 1981 and went on to earn her Juris Doctorate from Tulane Law School in 1984. Following her graduation, she practiced law in Many, Louisiana, where she also served as an Assistant District Attorney for the 11th Judicial District - District Attorney's Office from 1984 until 1990. Her early career laid a strong foundation for her future roles in the judiciary.

In 1990, Judge Pickett was elected as a district judge for the 11th Judicial District, serving Sabine and DeSoto Parishes. Her dedication to justice and her fair, balanced approach quickly earned her the respect of her peers and the community. In May of 1997, she was elected to the Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal, a position she held with distinction. Her re-elections in 2002, 2012, and 2022 are a testament to her exemplary service and the trust placed in her by the electorate. On January 1, 2023, she ascended to the role of Chief Judge of the Third Circuit, further solidifying her legacy in the Louisiana judiciary.

Beyond her judicial duties, Chief Judge Pickett continues to contribute to the legal profession through her involvement in various boards and committees. She currently serves on the Board of Governors of the Louisiana Judicial College and the Judicial Budgetary Control Board. Her commitment to these roles underscores her dedication to the continuous improvement of the judicial system and her unwavering commitment to public service. Judge Pickett's career is a shining example of dedication, integrity, and service to the community.

Judge Van H. Kyzar is a distinguished judge on the Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal, known for his deep roots in Natchitoches and his extensive legal expertise. A lifelong

resident of Natchitoches, Kyzar's commitment to his community is evident in both his personal and professional life. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Northwestern State University in 1979, laying a strong foundation for his future legal career. His academic journey continued at the Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center, where he received his Juris Doctorate in 1983.

Kyzar's professional career is marked by his significant contributions to the legal field and his unwavering dedication to public service. Before his election to the Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal in November 2016, he served as the district attorney for Louisiana's Tenth Judicial District, representing Natchitoches Parish. In this role, Kyzar demonstrated his commitment to justice and his ability to handle complex legal matters with integrity and fairness. His tenure as district attorney was characterized by his proactive approach to law enforcement and his efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of the community.

In addition to his public service, Kyzar has 20 years of experience as a senior partner in a private law firm, where he honed his legal skills and built a reputation for excellence. His election to the Third Circuit Court of Appeal, with a term beginning on January 1, 2017, and ending on December 31, 2026, is a testament to his legal acumen and the trust placed in him by the electorate. Judge Kyzar's career reflects his lifelong dedication to Natchitoches and his unwavering commitment to serving the community through the law.

Session 3: Summary Judgement

Judge Lala Brittain Sylvester, a lifelong resident of Natchitoches and a proud Louisianian, has dedicated her life to serving her community and upholding the law with integrity and compassion. She grew up in Natchitoches, graduated from St. Mary's High School, and went on to earn a Bachelor of Science in General Studies from Northwestern State University in 1982. She later pursued her passion for justice, earning a law degree from Southern University Law Center in 1987.

For more than 20 years, Judge Sylvester practiced law privately and served as an Assistant District Attorney from 2006 to 2014. In 2015, she was sworn in as Judge for Division B of the 10th Judicial District Court, where she continues to serve today. She has been an active member of both the Louisiana State Bar Association and the Natchitoches Parish Bar Association.

Deeply involved in her community, Judge Sylvester has served as president of the Service League of Natchitoches and the St. Mary's Foundation. She also chaired the board for the Natchitoches Regional Medical Center Foundation and its scholarship program. Additionally, she is a member of Beta Sigma Phi, the Natchitoches Historic Foundation, and the American Legion Auxiliary. She holds the distinguished title of Lady of the Holy Sepulchre in the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.

Judge Sylvester is married to Russell “Rusty” Sylvester, and together they have four children: Brittany, Courtney, Ashley, and Kathleen. The Sylvester family are devoted members of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church.

K. Jacob Ruppert was appointed Court Counsel and District Hearing Officer by the judiciary of the 10th Judicial District Court of Louisiana (Natchitoches Parish) in August 2017, after serving in that position for 12 years with the 11th Judicial District Court (Sabine Parish). Ruppert has been an attorney since 1995 and is admitted to the bars of New York, Louisiana, and the District of Columbia.

He received his undergraduate degree from the University of New Orleans (Alpha Theta Epsilon Honor Society) and his Juris Doctor from the City University of New York School of Law (CUNY Law Review, ILSA Journal of International and Comparative Law). Ruppert has been awarded international study scholarships at l’Université Catholique de l’Ouest-Angers in France (French/French Commerce) and Universidad de la Habana (Cuban Legal Studies/Quarantine of HIV Cubanos). He relocated to Central Louisiana as a Hurricane Katrina evacuee, having moved to New Orleans from New York City two months before the storm.

As Court Counsel, Ruppert serves as a legal advisor, researcher, analyst, and writer for the District Court Judiciary in the adjudication of all matters (civil, criminal, juvenile, and family). He writes orders, judgments, opinions, and confidential bench memoranda, and prepares the judiciary with procedural and substantive legal analysis and commentary on pending matters. As District Hearing Officer, he conducts trials in paternity, child support, spousal support, and domestic violence, in addition to conducting conferences in litigation between self-represented litigants.

Ruppert serves on the Louisiana Supreme Court's Self-Represented Litigant Committee and is the current president of the Louisiana Hearing Officers’ Association (LaHOA). He is frequently seen educating the state bench and bar on matters of trial practice law and rules, alimentary obligations, and family law.

Ruppert has been an adjunct faculty member with the Department of Criminal Justice at Northwestern State University since 2015, where he continues to contribute to the academic community.

Session 4: Best Practices Before the Louisiana Supreme Court: Insights From Within

Associate Justice Scott J. Crichton – see Session 1

Mary Watson Smith is the Managing Member of the Law Office of Mary Watson Smith, L.L.C., a boutique firm focused on appeals, supervisory writs, and substantive trial-level briefing in complex areas of civil law. Mary started her practice at a career crossroads. She has built a thriving firm providing an alternative path for other parents like her who are high-achieving, brilliant lawyers who also value a flexible work/life balance.

Mary has worked at every level of the state court system as a law clerk to Justice Jeannette Theriot Knoll, Justice Greg Guidry, Justice Pro Tempore Susan Chehardy, and Judge Ricky Wicker and as an Assistant District Attorney in St. Tammany and Washington Parishes. At the helm of her own firm, she has worked with over 100 different Plaintiff firms across the state, advising on and working through every aspect of litigation from petition to appeal. Mary is a member of the Louisiana Law Institute's Code of Civil Procedure Committee and Appellate Subcommittee.

Mary is also a member of the Executive Committee and the Amicus Committee for the Louisiana Association for Justice, and she is a recipient of LAJ's 2023-2024 President's Award. She is Louisiana's Revitalization Governor for the American Association for Justice. She is a member of Better Louisiana's 2025 Louisiana Leadership Class. Mary is AV-Rated by Martindale-Hubbell and a New Orleans Magazine Top Lawyer in Appeals (2023, 2024).

Mary received her B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of Dallas, where she became a member of Phi Beta Kappa. She graduated cum laude from law school at George Mason University. She is the adoring wife of Alex Smith and mother of three sweet and silly kids – Evelyn (6), Jeannette (5), and Bex (2).

Session 5: Immigration and Employment

Philip J. Hunter joined The Scott Law Firm as an associate attorney in 2016 after working at the firm as a law clerk in 2015. He practices in the fields of Immigration, Criminal Defense, and Personal Injury. After obtaining a degree in political science from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Mr. Hunter went on to receive his Juris Doctorate from Paul M. Hebert Law Center at LSU.

Mr. Hunter has been a proud resident of Baton Rouge since 2013 and is a native of Alexandria, Louisiana. Throughout his time in Baton Rouge, Mr. Hunter has been active in the community and is pleased to continue helping people of the community through his law practice. He spends half of the week in Jena, Louisiana visiting the LaSalle Detention Facility and practicing in the Jena Immigration Court.

Session 6: Criminal Law

Judge Verity Gentry has established herself as a distinguished legal professional and is currently serving as a judge for the 11th Judicial District Court in Louisiana. Her legal practice spans criminal defense, personal injury, and family law, where she has consistently demonstrated compassionate and effective advocacy. Judge Gentry's commitment to ensuring that her clients' rights and interests are thoroughly asserted both in and outside the courtroom has earned her a reputation as a trusted and dedicated legal counselor.

Judge Gentry's journey in the legal field began with her education at Loyola University College of Law in New Orleans, where she earned her Juris Doctor cum laude in 2010.

During her time at Loyola, she served as the Substance and Citation Editor for the Maritime Law Journal and was a member of the St. Thomas More Inn of Court. These roles underscored her dedication to legal scholarship and excellence. Prior to law school, she obtained a Bachelor of Science in Business (Pre-Law), from Louisiana State University in 2007.

Her early career included valuable internships with Senator Mary Landrieu in Washington, D.C., and the Louisiana Attorney General's Office. After passing the bar, Judge Bell joined the Orleans Public Defenders, where she represented defendants at every stage of litigation, including evidence and bond hearings, and Fourth and Fifth Amendment litigation. Her work in these roles highlighted her commitment to fair and just legal processes.

As the founder of her own firm, she continued to excel, handling cases involving criminal defense, personal injury, and family law. Gentry is known for her rigorous approach to pre-litigation and has successfully utilized expert testimony to challenge the reliability of eyewitness identifications. Now, as a judge for the 11th Judicial District Court, Judge Gentry brings her extensive legal experience and unwavering commitment to justice to the bench, ensuring that the principles of fairness and due process are upheld in every case she adjudicates.

T. Taylor Townsend has more than 35 years of experience as an attorney, and he has become a trusted name in the practice of law, as well as in the political arena. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree from Northwestern State University and a Juris Doctor from Southern University Law School in Baton Rouge, Townsend joined the Natchitoches firm Kelly, Thomas & Townsend.

In 2014 he formed the T. Taylor Townsend Law Firm, currently located on the property of the one and only taxi stand in the City of Lights. Townsend continues to apply his extensive expertise and personal service to clients in the areas of offshore oil and gas workplace accidents; medical malpractice when negligence by doctors or other health care personnel results in declining health, catastrophic injury and wrongful death; motor vehicle accidents of all kinds, including car accidents with enormous commercial tractor-trailers and 18-wheelers; premises liability slip and falls on unsafe property; and state and federal criminal defense work.

From 2000 to 2008, Townsend served in the Louisiana House of Representatives, where he was Chairman of the House Ways & Means Committee. During his tenure, Townsend tirelessly worked on local issues with a specific focus on economic development, education and health care choices. Upon the election of Governor-Elect John Bel Edwards, Townsend proudly accepted the position of Co-Chairman on Edwards' Transition Team.

D. Scott Kendrick is a distinguished attorney with a robust educational background and a commendable career in public service. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Business

Administration from Northwestern State University in 1991, followed by a Juris Doctorate from the LSU Paul M. Hebert Law Center in 2001. This solid foundation in both business and law has equipped him with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in his legal career.

Kendrick's professional journey is marked by his unwavering commitment to public service. He has served as a public defender in Natchitoches, Red River, and DeSoto Parishes, and currently holds the position of public defender in Sabine Parish. In these roles, Kendrick has dedicated himself to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their financial status, have access to quality legal representation. His work as a public defender underscores his belief in justice and equality, and his efforts have made a significant impact on the communities he serves.

In addition to his public defender duties, Kendrick continues to support his hometown of Natchitoches by maintaining private practice there. This dual commitment to both public service and private practice highlights his dedication to his community and his profession. Kendrick's career is a testament to his passion for the law and his unwavering commitment to serving others.

Session 7: Professionalism

The Honorable James T. Genovese, a native of Opelousas, was named the 21st president of Northwestern State University on July 18, 2024. He previously served as an Associate Justice on the Louisiana Supreme Court for eight years until August 5, 2024.

Genovese earned a Bachelor of Arts from NSU in 1971 and a Juris Doctorate from Loyola University New Orleans in 1974 with honors in property law. He practiced law in Acadiana for over 20 years and held leadership roles in the St. Landry Parish Bar Association. He is admitted to practice in all state and federal courts in Louisiana, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

His judicial career spanned over 25 years, beginning as a district judge for the 27th Judicial District Court in 1995. He later served on the Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal (2005-2016) and the Louisiana Supreme Court (2017-2024). Genovese has been a panelist and lecturer at numerous legal education seminars on professionalism, ethics, and appellate procedures.

He and his wife, Martha Anne Janes, have five daughters and four grandchildren.