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## Craig Watkins' Path to Public Service

**FORT WORTH, Texas** – Looking back on the path that led him to his current seat as the District Attorney of Dallas County, Craig Watkins '94 can recall an incident in his career when he listened to a client laugh about killing an 8-year-old child over a drug deal gone awry.

It was then that he made the decision to leave the private practice he had opened in South Dallas and pursue legal work in the public service sector.

“I thought, maybe it’s not worth it. Maybe it’s not worth all that money,” Watkins said. “I realized that one day I would have to look at myself in the mirror and ask, ‘Am I proud of what I’ve done?’ That was when I decided to go into public service.”

Watkins spoke to over 50 law school students, staff, faculty, and alumni on Tuesday, Feb. 12, in the law school’s Amon G. Carter Lecture Hall. While his law school presentations typically focus on his work with the Innocence Project of Texas and the Wesleyan Innocence Project, Watkins spoke at length about the events and personal revelations that cultivated his decision to run for district attorney of Dallas County.

A member of the law school’s first graduating class, Watkins started his legal career in the Dallas city attorney’s office, later moving to the public defender’s office. He applied for positions within the district attorney’s office, but was turned down on more than one occasion. Watkins went on to open his own practice in South Dallas, and he said it was during that time that he began to realize some things about himself.

“As a young lawyer, when you go to trial and are winning cases, you feel like a super-lawyer,” Watkins said. “But I noticed that 99 percent of the folks I represented were guilty, and eventually they’d end up back on the street.”

It was following this observation that Watkins found himself listening to the testimony of the man who had killed the young boy over a drug deal. In pursuit of his decision to go into public service, he ran for district attorney of Dallas County in 2002.

While he was not elected the first time he ran, Watkins won the November 2006 election, becoming the first African-American to be elected as the Dallas County district attorney. He took office in January 2007 and has been changing the ways in which Dallas handles crime and criminals with his “smart on crime” approach. Watkins is also looking at past mistakes, enlisting help from the Innocence Project to investigate claims of actual innocence made by Dallas county inmates. With 15 individuals exonerated following re-examination of evidence and DNA-testing that was previously denied, Dallas currently leads the nation in DNA exonerations.

“Change is different,” Watkins said, referring to his approach. “There’s an unknown factor, and you don’t know what’s going to happen. I felt like it was my duty to bring about that change.”

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