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THE ANNUAL LIST

The Top Young Attorneys in Texas

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Lessons learned in the Air Force inspire Jeff Whitfield, both on and off duty

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SUZETTE SELDEN'S SECRETS TO BEING A CLOSER

TAJ CLAYTON ON HUMBLE PIE, HARD WORK AND COMPARISONS TO PRESIDENT OBAMA



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TEXAS MONTHLY



Q: Who were your early mentors?

A: My parents and my older sister. Like I said, my parents were glass-factory workers who had four kids, and our house, our home, operated like clockwork. Despite doing backbreaking work in the glass factory, they made small miracles happen every day with having us up and ready for school, always on time, making sure that we had our homework done.

And just really, really, not only giving us good values, but living them by example. They had me in the airport before I took the plane to go to Harvard, and they sat me down and said, "We never went to college. We've done the best job we can, but from here on out you have to sort of figure some things out on your own. But you can always fall back on all the lessons we taught you." That's really sort of carried me.

Q: And professional mentors?

A: Tom Melsheimer has been incredible. He's really taken a personal interest in my career to make sure I get staffed on good cases and get good experience. When I decided to run for Congress, outside my family he was one of the first people I told, and he didn't blink an eye. He said, "I want to be the first person to make a donation, and also, I'd be honored if I could serve as treasurer."

Professor Charles Ogletree at Harvard Law School has continued to be phenomenal as a mentor to me. He's been a mentor to President Obama and Michelle and many folks who've graduated from law school. And Ron McCray, who's co-owner of the Boston Celtics. ... They've been so phenomenal.

Q: So what was it like to run for Congress?

A: Unsuccessful, but it was a phenomenal experience and one of the most fulfilling things I've ever done. There's a great saying, "If it is to be, it's up to me." I got tired of sort of just sitting around and seeing the issues fester ... and decided to step up. I really value standing up for people and being an advocate. A lot of the skills that I've developed as a lawyer I thought I could bring to bear as a congressman, where you're being a champion for others.

Q: Any future political aspirations?

A: We've decided I'm not going to run in the short term. I gave it my all this go-around. If I do go for elected office, it will have to be after the kids are grown. But we're both committed to being involved politically and community-wise.

Q: You and your wife have been strong supporters of President Obama.

A: When I was a student at Harvard Law School, I had really good relationships with a lot of professors, and they knew I was interested in politics. This was before Obama really hit the national scene, when he was still a state legislator, and they said, "Put this guy on your radar, Taj, he's impressive, and he impresses the Harvard faculty," which is really hard to do. When he announced for the presidency, my wife and I got involved immediately and started fundraising for him and served on his Texas finance committee. The first time my wife and I met him at an event, he was getting background on us, and he says, "What are you guys planning to do?" And my wife was like, "We want to turn Texas blue and we want to have an impact," and he was like, "I'm going to hold you to that."

Q: Your campaign drew a lot of attention, and even a comparison or two of yourself and your wife to the Obamas.

A: To have people compare me to someone I greatly admire like Obama, it's flattering. For a congressional race in Texas to have an article featured in *The New York Times* and to be featured in *Politico* multiple times and *The Huffington Post*, to create that buzz about issues that are so important, it was flattering.

Q: What would you say is the most important lesson that you've learned in life?

A: One important lesson is that hard work trumps almost everything when you're striving for success. It overcomes talent, it overcomes intelligence, it overcomes a lot of God-given attributes. Even more important is that time is so precious. You really don't want to take a second with your loved ones for granted. 📖

This interview has been condensed.

Noaman Azhar, of Azhar & Azhar Law Firm, has been recognized for his exceptional ability by being selected to the 2014 Texas Rising Stars list. Noaman's practice covers all areas of immigration, including the representation of Fortune 500 companies for their corporate needs as well as clients in immigration court. His reputation as a zealous advocate for his clients has been demonstrated through his case victories and successful trial record.



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