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Morgan Scroggins Oral History Interview

Andrew Scroggins, Interviewer

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Note that this transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and may differ slightly from the original audio recording.

Andrew Scroggins

I am here with Morgan Scroggins, a criminal defense attorney based in Granite City, Illinois. Morgan, can you start off by giving us a bit of background information about yourself?

Morgan Scroggins

Sure. Well, I grew up in Granite City, Illinois, here in Madison County, graduated high school in 1981 went to SIUE Edwardsville for my undergraduate degree and received my juris doctorate, graduating from SIU Carbondale in 1989. I was licensed that same year. I began my practice by working as an assistant state's attorney in St Clair County, Illinois, where Belleville is the county seat. It's just south of Madison County. Worked there for a couple years and then went into private practice. Currently, my office is located in Granite City, Illinois. I do criminal defense work privately, and I'm also, I do work for the Madison County Public Defender's Office. I have a steady case law through them, and I'm paid through the county for my work as a Madison County Public Defender.

Andrew Scroggins

Okay, what made you want to go into law?

Morgan Scroggins

Well, my father was a lawyer, and quite frankly, you know, I went to school and I didn't know what I wanted to do, and so I kind of became a lawyer by default, because I didn't know what I wanted to do, and therefore I chose my father's practice.

Andrew Scroggins

So you would say you were heavily influenced to go into law by your father?

Morgan Scroggins

Yes

Andrew Scroggins

Along the way, did you find any mentors, aside from your father, that helped you along your career path?

Morgan Scroggins

Yes, my first mentor would have been John Baricevic, that's B-A-R-I C-E-V-I-C, he, he was the state's attorney of St Clair County in well, in 1989, 90, 91, into 92. I quit, and then I had a mentor by the name of Judy Cates when I worked for Brennan Cates and Constance out of Belleville, and she is now an appellate justice for the southern, the Fifth District of Illinois. There was John Rakowski, who is who was a longtime public defender in Madison County, who I also consider a mentor. And of course, my father, my father, mentored me from 1992 until his death in 2001.

Andrew Scroggins

Very nice. Um, uh, do you have a case when you look back on your career, do you have a case or certain cases that hold more weight than others, that you're more proud of coming out as a victor in that case?

Morgan Scroggins

Sure, there's most of the cases that I'm most proud of involve the charge of murder, where the defendant was charged with murder. The most famous case that I think I was involved in was people versus Arnold Fonseca, where he was he was charged with murder down in Southern Illinois, down in Harrisburg, Saline County, Illinois, and we tried it to verdict, and the jury found him not guilty. It was the first not guilty verdict in Southern Illinois in 35 years. I was very proud of that. I felt that, you know, they tried to stack the deck against me, but we prevailed in that. We've had other, murder cases. There was a murder case in 1998 that I tried with my father where we got a good result, although it wasn't not guilty, it wasn't guilty of first degree. He ended up doing about three years in prison, and that was it. It's most memorable to me because I tried it with my father, and it was the first murder trial I ever tried. Wasn't the first one I ever handled, but it was first one I ever tried, and I was just proud of the fact that we were able to get it from first degree to second degree. I felt that was a big accomplishment. And there are other murder cases that I've tried, because they're all interesting. They all take everything out of you, and they all are very, very difficult, but yet satisfying after you put all your time and effort into them.

Andrew Scroggins

So you you have a focus on criminal defense cases. Do you practice any other types of law and represent other types of people in the court of law?

Morgan Scroggins

Sure. So my office is kind of a general practice, and I have two, two associates who work for me. One concentrates in business law, estate law, the other individual concentrates a lot in family law. And because we are diverse, from time to time, I will handle family cases. I will handle small evictions, small personal injury cases, things that come in the door.

Andrew Scroggins

You said you went to SIUC or...

Morgan Scroggins

SIUC for law school, SIUE for undergraduate work.

Andrew Scroggins

Can you describe your experience as an undergrad leading into law school and your experiences at the Southern Illinois University?

Morgan Scroggins

So SIU Edwardsville, back in the 80s, is when I went to school there. I went to school at SIU Edwardsville from 1982 to 19, when I graduated in 1986. I lived at home because it was largely a commuter school at that point. I know it now has a large on campus presence, but in, like I said, in the 80s, there were very few, there was very few housing at SIUE. But I liked my experience there. My undergraduate studies concentrated in history and political science, so I had kind of a double major history ended up being a minor, because I did not do the theses at the end, but I had enough hours for a double major: history and political science. And I really enjoyed the professors, especially in my history courses, because they were, they were just good professors, and they kind of brought history to life for me when I would go to class, and I enjoyed my time there, because I received a degree from there. And so if do you want me to talk about my law school experience?

Andrew Scroggins

Sure, yeah

Morgan Scroggins

So the law school experience, in 1986 I moved to Carbondale, Illinois, and we lived in dormitories the first year because they encouraged it for law students so as to immerse yourself in the law the very first year was very, very difficult. I didn't know if I was going to survive law school. The first year the professors dedicate the first year into teaching you how to think like a lawyer, how to think critically, how to identify issues, in fact patterns that pertain to the law. And because it is a small law school, it was a close knit group. We all got to know each other very well. It felt like a family going to school there, but you did have some guys that were ultra competitive, and you couldn't trust them, because they would do things like rip cases out of case law books to try to hide them from other students in order to gain an advantage. Although it was like a family, it was also very highly competitive. I especially liked my third year because I was close to getting to work and because they taught me how to be a trial lawyer. Most of the studying is just studying laws and analysis and how to put analysis to the practical application in the law. But my third year, I learned that I might be a pretty good trial lawyer, and so my love of trial started my third year in law school

Andrew Scroggins

As an expert in the field of law, can you describe for us the importance just of law itself?

Morgan Scroggins

Well, the importance of law is without law, you have chaos. So, you know, there's a structure, especially in the United States, of laws and courts and the jury system to ensure that there is an order in society. And without laws, there is no order in society. And so I think it's important for lawyers to understand that they are protectors of the law, and they are to apply the law as best they can. We have ethical duties to ensure that we're not trying to use the law to gain advantage in some ways and things like that. But I'm proud to be a lawyer because I think it's important to society and for society that lawyers exist. Lawyers are very involved in making law, both through trying cases and challenging laws. And there are a lot of lawyers in Congress, the Senate, in state senates and state congresspeople who are working on trying to improve the law every year.

Andrew Scroggins

Would you say that our local Madison County law enforcement and government uphold those values?

Morgan Scroggins

Oh, I think so. You know, there's a lot of, you know, a lot of negative press with regards to police officers, but I think a majority of the police officers are good police officers. And I think that, you know, being a police officer, there is a cross section in society, and there are some good cops and there are some bad cops and there are incompetent cops, but I think for the most part, the police force is there to protect the people and patrol the streets, make sure that everything is safe. I also believe that the the State's Attorney's Office in Madison County and the judges in Madison County take their job seriously and are very professional about it. And I feel, for the most part, when I'm in a fight in the courtroom, that it's pretty much a fair fight.

Andrew Scroggins

So you brought up law enforcement and cops. What is your personal, and most criminal defense attorneys, I wouldn't say personal, but professional relationship with, you know, the law enforcement, like the guys that you see at the courthouse and also guys, you know, who may have to testify against you, maybe to get it a little more complicated.

Morgan Scroggins

Well, I think from my standpoint, I, you know, I try to maintain a professional distance, at least from law enforcement, because that's who I'm fighting all the time as a criminal defense attorney. I'm fighting the State's Attorney's Office, but I'm fighting the witnesses, which are, you know, the large majority are police officers. And so, but I think that there's a professional respect between most criminal defense attorneys and most police officers. Now again, because it is cross section of society, both in the law as a lawyer and as a police officer, you do have some police officers who just don't like criminal defense

attorneys, and you have some criminal defense attorneys who just don't like police officers, and I try to separate that when I'm, you know, looking at cases and stuff. But there are time to time I have to get a police officer on the stand, cross examine them and it, you know, and hopefully, if I do a good job, then that police officer is not going to be very happy with me at the end of the day. So, and, you know, with regards to the judges, you have to, even if you disagree with the judge's decision, you have to maintain your professional, your professional-ism even when you get a bad verdict or a bad decision. And so, you know, it's sometimes difficult. But you know, being a lawyer doesn't mean that you're constantly personally involved in these cases. In fact, you need to have a professional distance from your clients so that you can do the best job for them, and you are not blinded by emotion in helping them with their case.

Andrew Scroggins

How long do you plan to practice?

Morgan Scroggins

Ah, until I quit enjoying it, and I enjoy it very much now. I'm now 62 years old, and people are starting to ask me when I'm going to retire, and I don't have an answer for them, because I'm having probably as good a time in my life as I ever have. So I'm comfortable practicing law. It can sometimes be headaches, a lot of anxiety, but I think at the end of the day, it's very rewarding and enjoyable, intermixing with both your clients, other attorneys, the State's Attorney's Office, and the judges. Yeah, it's, it's good life.

Andrew Scroggins

So it, it may not be public knowledge, but for a little bit there, there were rumblings that you were considered to run for State's Attorney. Were you?

Morgan Scroggins

I don't think so. You know, I was contacted by the Madison County Democratic Party asking if I wanted to run for office. Now, with regards to the state's attorney I don't think anybody has personally asked me to run for State's Attorney, nor would I want to

Andrew Scroggins

Understood. Would you ever feel the need, for lack of a better word, or want to be represented in a political way, as a political, after you've done, after you've possibly retired.

Morgan Scroggins

I don't know

Andrew Scroggins

get into politics for a few years?

Morgan Scroggins

Well, as my father taught me, politics is in every cross section of society. And he put it very simply, simple to me. He said, politics is the ability to get along and I didn't understand it at first, and now I do. I mean, you know, basically politics is knowing people, getting people to like you, getting people to vote for you, so that you can take office, and hopefully so that you can try to take care of society through representation as best you can. Whether it be a judge, a state's attorney or congressman, they all have their different jobs. But you know, if I didn't think that I had the ability to represent whoever I was representing to the best of my ability, then I wouldn't do it, and quite frankly, I don't want to do it right now, because I'm perfectly happy practicing law.

Andrew Scroggins

What do you like to do outside of work?

Morgan Scroggins

I am avid, I watch a lot of sports. I like to socialize. I like to go to concerts. You know, live music is one of my passions. Live sports is one of my passions. I enjoy all four major sports, football, hockey, baseball and basketball. I enjoy that competition. I enjoy a good rock and roll concert with talented musicians and singers who can put on a good show. I like to go to dinner with my wife, have drinks with friends, work on the house a little bit. That's about it.

Andrew Scroggins

I want to take it back to, back to your career. How satisfying is it to win a case you may not have been expected to win?

Morgan Scroggins

Oh, it's

Andrew Scroggins

Can you describe the feeling?

Morgan Scroggins

Well, it's the biggest thrill in the world. You know, first off, you know you have the joy of taking care of the individual who you've been working with very closely for months and months and months and sometimes years, and then you have the satisfaction of winning, just simply winning. And you know, as long as I felt that I've done the best job I can for my client, winning is somewhat secondary, not really, but somewhat secondary. It's more about doing what you can for your client. And sometimes doing what you can for your client doesn't necessarily mean you've won. It just means that you made that whatever landing they have to have as soft as possible.

Andrew Scroggins

I'm going to go ahead and close us out here. I want to thank you for sitting down with me and explaining and describing your career to me, it was nice to sit down and chat with you. Is there anything you would like to say to close us out?

Morgan Scroggins

No, I don't think so. I think I've said everything. I think I, you know, I really, I kind of found the law, not so much by mistake, but by default. And I'm glad that I didn't know what to do, and therefore chose law as a default, because I've really enjoyed it almost always throughout my career, there have been good times and bad times, ups and downs, but overall, it's it's been a nice experience.

Andrew Scroggins

All right. Well, thank you for meeting with me.

Morgan Scroggins

Thank you. You.