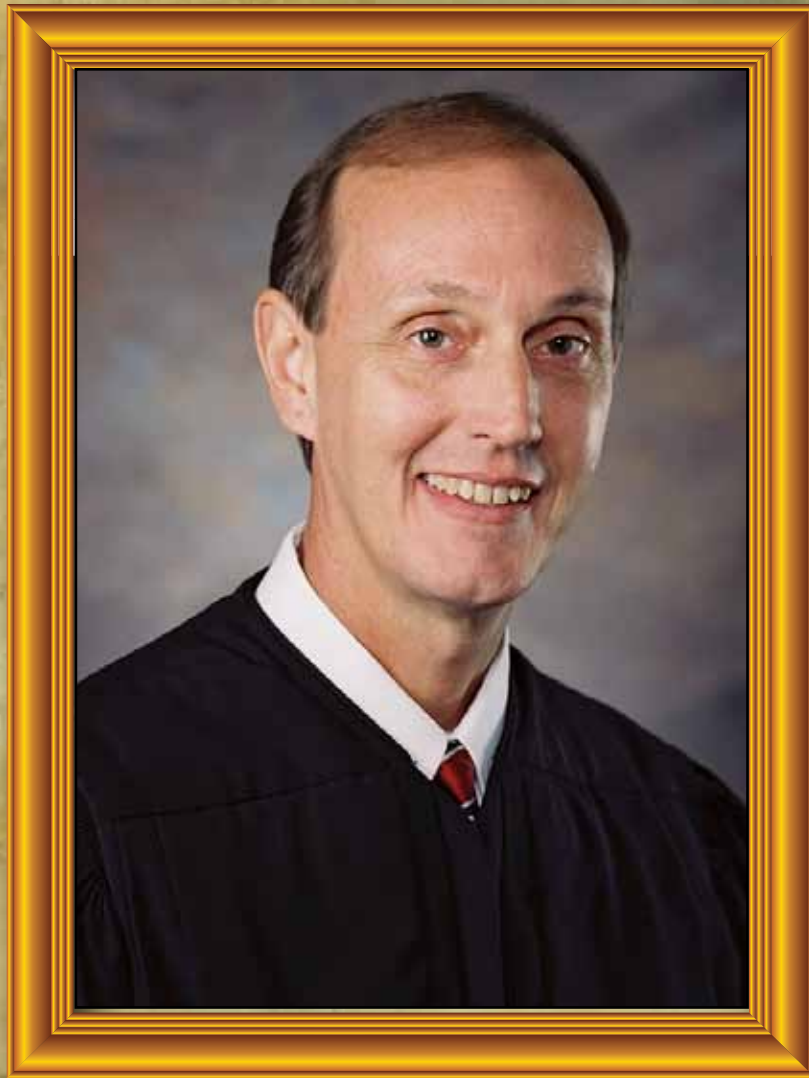


# **Portraits & Perspectives: Louisiana Supreme Court Associate Justices**



**One on One with Louisiana Supreme Court  
Associate Justice John L. Weimer**

**Interviewed by Anthony M. DiLeo**

Asking Louisiana Supreme Court Associate Justice John L. Weimer to talk about his achievements for this interview proved challenging. All who know him well know he is reluctant to discuss his accomplishments about his career as a judge, lawyer and teacher.

Justice Weimer has served as a judge in the state courts of Louisiana for the past 20 years, as a trial judge, an appellate judge and now a Supreme Court Justice. He represents the Louisiana Supreme Court's 6th District, which includes the 12 parishes of St. Martin, Iberia, St. Mary, Assumption, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Charles, Terrebonne, Lafourche, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines. Serving on the Supreme Court for 14 years, he was elected to a full term in 2002 and re-elected without opposition in 2012. His current term expires in 2022.

Prior to his election to the Supreme Court, Justice Weimer served as judge *pro tempore* of the 17th Judicial District Court, Division D. He was elected judge for the 17th Judicial District Court, Division A, in 1995 and re-elected in 1996 without opposition. In 1998, he was elected judge of the 1st Circuit Court of Appeal, District 1, Division B, and served until his election to the Supreme Court in 2001.

Justice Weimer has received numerous awards and honors including Victims & Citizens Against Crime Outstanding Judicial Award; Crimefighter's Outstanding Jurist Award; the 2015 Outstanding Lafourche Parish Public School Graduate; the 2002 Nicholls State University Outstanding Alumni Award and the 50th Anniversary Golden Graduate Award; Who's Who Among American Teachers; and the Nicholls State University Presidential Award for Teaching Excellence.



Louisiana Supreme Court Associate Justice John L. Weimer with his family, from left, his youngest daughter Emily, his wife Penny, his oldest daughter Jacqueline and his middle daughter Katherine. Photo courtesy of Weimer Family.

He was recognized for the significant assistance he provided in establishing the Lafourche Parish Drug Treatment Court. He is active in his community as well, including as a member of the Rotary Club, the Thibodaux Volunteer Fire Department and Christ the Redeemer Catholic Church Pastoral Counsel. He works with the Lafourche Parish Student Government Day Program and other school programs encouraging children to avoid meeting judges in their professional settings.

Born in Thibodaux in 1954, Justice Weimer is the oldest of five children. He graduated from Thibodaux High School in 1972 and financed his education by working in the oil fields. He received his BS degree in 1976 from Nicholls State University and his JD degree in 1980 from Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center.

Justice Weimer is married to Penny Hymel Weimer and has three daughters. He is an avid Harley Davidson rider and art enthusiast. And while reluctant to formally call himself an artist, Justice Weimer has created award-winning images of south Louisiana with exquisite detail and accuracy, images of beauty in execution and composition, many of which he has donated to charitable auctions.

Rather than merely listing achievements, we talked about stories of how his professional life unfolded. These stories tell more than anything we could say about the character and integrity of this Justice.

**Journal:** Justice Weimer, tell us about yourself.

**Weimer:** I grew up in Thibodaux in Lafourche Parish. My parents were both 29 years old when they married. It was the first marriage for both of them, and they had five kids in six years. I was the oldest. My mother died when I was 9 years old and my youngest brother was 3. My father had the unbelievably difficult task of raising five kids on his own. He owned a service station, and I went to work for him when I was in the seventh grade and worked there through high school. I attended a Catholic school through the seventh grade, then attended and graduated from public school. I muddled through high school and can speak candidly about that because my children are now all out of high school. I didn't want them emulating my ineptitude in high school [laughing]. I earned a degree in business from Nicholls, went to LSU Law School and then went back to Thibodaux to practice law.

**Journal:** How did you begin your practice of law?

**Weimer:** Initially, I went to work with Billy Tauzin. I had worked with Billy as a legislative assistant. I would work part of the summer in the Legislature, first with Sen. Harvey Peltier and then later with Billy. I would then spend the balance of the summer working offshore, on the boats and rigs, in order to earn enough money to finance my education. Billy always said, "When you get out of law school, I want you to come and work with me." And, that's exactly what happened. He hired me before I finished law school. He was elected to Congress the day I graduated. Billy had a general, small-town practice, but soon realized that, because of the demands of his position in Congress and certain ethical rules, it wouldn't be appropriate to continue practicing law. I then went to work for Randy Parro and Jerald Block. When Randy was elected to the district bench, in the early 1980s, I remained with Jerald. We had a general civil practice. I did a lot of real estate work; we represented a savings and loan; we also represented a hometown community bank.

**Journal:** What made you decide to seek the position on the court?

**Weimer:** I had begun teaching law classes part-time at Nicholls. Prior to that, let me mention, I taught a law class through the American Institute of Banking (AIB) and that led to me teaching at Nicholls. There is a direct linear progression between me teaching that AIB class and us being here today. I won't bore you with all the details, but [laughing], that AIB position led to me teaching at Nicholls part-time, which eventually led to me teaching at Nicholls full-time, which played a role in me being appointed to the bench when then-District Judge Randy Parro was elected to the Court of Appeal. I was grading papers when he called and asked me if I would consider allowing him to submit my name to the Supreme Court to take his place on the district bench. I declined. I was very content teaching full-time and practicing law part-time and had no interest or aspirations whatsoever in serving as a judge.

Randy, however, persisted and convinced me to serve if appointed. Justice Lemmon appointed me. My career has



Louisiana Supreme Court Associate Justice John L. Weimer speaks during the 2015 LSBA Pro Bono Publico Awards ceremony. Photo by Matthew Hinton Photography.

moved through fate and circumstances that I still have a hard time comprehending. For example, my father-in-law and Justice Lemmon worked at a plant together before Justice Lemmon went to law school. My wife attended school with some of Justice Lemmon's children so they knew one another. I knew Justice Lemmon in passing, but based on Randy's recommendation and the fact that I was primarily a teacher and not a full-time attorney, which could have created some conflicts, Justice Lemmon recommended me to his colleagues on the Supreme Court and they approved my appointment. I ended up serving as a district judge *pro tempore* for 7.5 months.

While I was serving as a judge, I still had classes to teach at Nicholls. I taught two of the classes and two of the judges I was serving with volunteered to teach two

other classes. So the judges were teaching and the teacher was judging [laughing].

I was very concerned about not having been in an everyday law practice for a number of years at that point in time and how I would transition to being a judge. I found that the experience of teaching was excellent preparation for becoming a judge. After all, judges make decisions and teachers are called upon daily to make decisions regarding their students' performances. Teachers have to have command of the classroom, as judges have to have command of the courtroom. Both positions involve scholarship and a desire to be of service. Having taught law classes, which covered every topic from abandoned property to zoning and included tort law and criminal law, proved immensely helpful.

I completed my service on the district

bench and thought that would be the end of my career as a judge. After 7.5 months, I went back to the university to teach full-time and practice law part-time. I also became involved in mediation. A dean and the then-president at Nicholls were both interested in moving me through the academic ranks with the idea that I would become involved in some administrative positions. I became the director of the Free Enterprise Week program at Nicholls, which involved high school students learning about the free enterprise system. Then, unfortunately, one of my former colleagues from the district bench died of cancer after a brief illness. I was literally giving blood for his benefit at the church I attend when someone came in and announced that he had passed away. I was told one of the last times he laughed was when I went to visit him and told him we were organizing a blood drive through the bar association and asked him if he minded having some lawyer blood [laughing].

I was then faced with a tough decision: whether to continue my career as a teacher or to run for district judge to fill an unexpired term. I anguished over that decision because I was very happy serving as a teacher and an attorney and doing some mediation work on the side. But, obviously, I decided to run and I was fortunate enough to be elected.

**Journal:** And that was in 1995?

**Weimer:** Yes. A couple years later, again most unfortunately, someone I really looked up to and who was a dear friend, and who had been in the automobile business with my father, Court of Appeal Judge J. Louis Watkins, died.

Again, I really anguished over what to do. I offered to defer to all the district judges — throughout the district, it was an eight-parish district — and they all deferred to me. They were content serving as district judges. One consideration was that, geographically, the district lined up incredibly well for me. Ascension Parish, in the middle of the district, is where my wife had a large number of family members. The district was anchored by Lafourche and Terrebonne, in the south, and one of my brothers was the chief civil deputy in the Sheriff's Office in West Baton Rouge Parish, the northern end of the district. I



A painting by Justice Weimer, "Laurel Valley Home on a Misty Morn, Thibodaux, LA." Photo courtesy of Weimer Family.

ran and was fortunate enough to be elected. Interestingly, Justice Lemmon came to the swearing-in ceremony and [laughing] my wife jokingly said, "Guard your health carefully because every time someone dies, he runs." Thankfully, Justice Lemmon didn't pass away. However, he did retire. Again, fate and circumstances provided me with an opportunity to seek that office and I was again fortunate enough to be elected.

**Journal:** And, did you have to run for the one year?

**Weimer:** Yes, Justice Lemmon retired early to provide an opportunity for more people to run. There were a number of appellate court judges who would have had to make a choice of whether to continue service on the Courts of Appeal or run for the Supreme Court. And, of course, if they were not successful, they would lose their position on the Court of Appeal.

So there is this incredible symmetry that Justice Lemmon commenced my career with the appointment, and I said during the campaign, I didn't run to take his place, no one could take his place, but someone had to run to fill the position.

**Journal:** So at the end of the one year?

**Weimer:** I had to run for reelection. I was fortunate enough to not have anyone sign up to run at the same time. I try to avoid saying opponents. I try not to consider the people who run for office at the

same time as I do as opponents. I have been in elections with extremely worthy candidates; we just happen to be seeking the same position at the same time.

**Journal:** That's a lovely sentiment and I think that is part of your mediation skill I am hearing right there.

**Weimer:** [laughing] No, it's sincere. They are all wonderful people and excellent judges. I have been incredibly blessed in seeking office. For example, going back to teaching, when I campaigned, almost every business, including banks, had a former student of mine working there. Every fair or festival or function I attend, I meet a former student. I taught roughly 3,000 students over my career. Also, I attended Nicholls in the early 1970s through 1976. Nicholls is in the very middle of the Supreme Court district, the area served by Nicholls covers most of the parishes in the Supreme Court district and many of the parishes in the Court of Appeal district. In each of the races that I was involved in, three campaigns and six primaries, the people I met through Nicholls both as a student and as a teacher were essentially the foundation of the campaign. When I took the oath of office at Nicholls to serve on our state's highest court, there were five of us (Jimmy Dagate, Danny Cavell, John Perry and Billy Stark) on the stage who had all started at Nicholls in 1972, finished in 1976, and went on to law school.



Justice Weimer and his Harley at No Problem Dragstrip in 2002. Photo courtesy of Weimer Family.

**Journal:** Judge Parro told me that he actually drove you to become a candidate.

**Weimer:** I like his version of the story. Do you want to hear the true version? [laughing]

**Journal:** Yes, he told me he told you, “You’re going to run for this office. Come with me.”

**Weimer:** Well, a judicial colleague was going to run and I wasn’t going to run. Unfortunately, right before qualifying, the colleague couldn’t run because of health reasons. I was at the office on Friday afternoon literally working on some opinions when I received phone calls simultaneously from Judge Parro and from my wife, who both said you ought to consider running for the position on the Supreme Court. We had a long chat and I said, “Look, let’s talk on the way there.” So we started driving to Baton Rouge from Thibodaux. There was an accident on the highway that delayed us. When we arrived at the state capital, it was right around 5:30. The children were with us and two of them had fallen asleep in the vehicle. Judge Parro threw one child over each shoulder and ran to a side entrance. My wife and I ran up the steps to the front entrance, but the doors were locked. We heard Judge Parro calling that he found an open door.

**Journal:** Last day?

**Weimer:** Yes, last day of qualifying. We went up the elevators and walked into the Secretary of State’s office where you have to qualify and the door was locked and the curtain drawn. I said, “Oh, well, it wasn’t meant to be. Let’s go have a nice meal.” My wife started knocking on the door and someone opened it, and through the door, my wife says, “It’s not 5:30. You’re not supposed to close until 5:30.” The person at the door said, “Well, my watch says it’s 5:30, but it depends on what time it says in the computer.” The computer was rebooted and indicated it was three minutes before qualifying closed. My wife handed them the qualifying fee, and I became a candidate. If Randy Parro hadn’t gotten us around the accident or found an open door, if we had arrived a couple minutes later, certainly my career would have been different. If a colleague hadn’t developed health issues, I wouldn’t have been a candidate. And that’s why I say fate and circumstances intervened way beyond my ability to comprehend.

**Journal:** On the judicial side, are there any particular opinions that are notable?

**Weimer:** I hesitate to single out any one opinion because I try very hard to give each and every case that comes before us my full

attention. I’m often asked if I have had an important case, and my response is that each case is immensely important to the litigants and their attorneys and, beyond that, to our system of justice and the Justices. So all cases are interesting and challenging.

I am immensely blessed with an incredibly talented and competent staff. I tell them often there’s room on this staff for one dummy and I’ve got that position sewn up [laughing]. A few years ago I did something I haven’t done in 10 years — I hired another law clerk and bought a car. The law clerk that I had on the district bench followed me to the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court. I hired another clerk when I was elected to the Court of Appeal and that clerk also followed me to the Supreme Court. I hired another clerk when I was elected to the Supreme Court and she is still with me. All those individuals, including my secretary, remained with me until two of my clerks decided to retire. So it had been 10 years since I hired a clerk and 10 years since I bought a car.

**Journal:** What are your hobbies right now?

**Weimer:** I dabble at painting. I would not flatter myself by saying I’m an artist, I assure you. I paint. I would be remiss if I didn’t say I attempt to play basketball with a group of guys; we’ve been playing for about 30 years now. I’m not a very good basketball player, but I run up and down the court with the best of them [laughing]. As I turn different decades, I always think I’ll not continue playing. But I’m past 60 and I’m still playing. I’m grateful I can do that. And I still have one bad habit left over from my misdirected youth. I still ride motorcycles.

**Journal:** What kind?

**Weimer:** I have a Harley Davidson, as do all of my brothers. We have the occasion to get together and ride, but far too infrequently.

You know, the job is so demanding and takes up so much time. Much of my free time is spent with my family. My youngest daughter is in college and is a collegiate athlete who hopes to coach, my eldest daughter is teaching after finishing graduate school, and my middle daughter just finished undergraduate school and is working in the medical field while planning to pursue future education in medicine. They are all doing

magnificently well, and thank God they are all pretty and smart like their momma. I am immensely blessed with a wonderful wife and three magnificent daughters who, collectively and individually, have taught me more than I've taught them. Any success that I have had is from them being who they are. They made me a much better person than I ever dreamed that I would be.

**Journal:** You've succeeded at many things.

**Weimer:** I have been blessed and fortunate. I've said this often, my law degree provided me with opportunities. In a six-year period, I went from being a full-time teacher, part-time attorney and mediator to being a district judge, an appellate court judge and a Supreme Court Justice. Because I switched positions, one of my colleagues who introduced me at a function said I was a "real Renaissance man," and from the back of the room someone said, "I don't know about a Renaissance man, it sounds like the boy can't hold a job to me" [laughing], which I had to concede. But I have hung on to this job at the Supreme Court for almost 14 years now.

**Journal:** And look at where you began. You had a mother who died when you were 9; you had a father raising all of these children; you were working at a service station. . . .

**Weimer:** Working in a service station was an educational experience. If you observe carefully, you learn from each life-experience. My father was an honest mechanic. Remarkably, when I ran for judge, I was amazed how so many people said, "I'm voting for you. Your daddy gave me a square deal when he worked on my car." I have my father's name. I'm named for my grandfather, too. He worked at a grocery store, which was the first supermarket in Thibodaux. He was the produce man and, the way the store was configured, he greeted everyone who walked into the store. And, again, by sharing the same name, people in another generation would say, "I remember your grandfather from the grocery store. He was always a gentleman." From my name sakes, I learned the virtue of honesty; the value of hard work; and how vitally important it is to treat everyone, regardless of their station in life, with dignity and respect. By working at the service station, I also learned



A painting by Justice Weimer, "South Lafourche Marsh, Fourchon, LA." Photo courtesy of Weimer Family.

how gratifying it can be to be of service and to help people.

My father worked on Randy Parro's car. I helped with something, maybe changed the oil in his car. Whenever he did business with my father, Randy would come in and talk to my father. He was always dressed real nice and he was a nice looking guy; I knew he was an attorney. I would listen to the conversations, but I never had enough gumption to participate. I would just listen, and he and my father would speak. Judge Parro tells this story: "I went to pick up my car at Weimer's service station and there was this long-haired, filthy, greasy, dirty kid who asked me what did you have to do to become an attorney? And I looked at this kid and thought to myself, 'This kid is going to need a lawyer someday. He's never going to be one.'" He concludes the story with, "Lo and behold, we ended up practicing law together and I recommended him to be on the bench, and now he is my colleague on the Court of Appeal." Then when I got elected to the Supreme Court, he said, "Now he's my boss." [laughing]

**Journal:** On the law side, is there anything in particular you would want to mention?

**Weimer:** Just recently I had the occasion to hand out awards with some of my colleagues to those attorneys involved in providing pro bono legal services. That was followed a few days later with a Louisiana Bar Foundation meeting and then, in short order, by the Bar's Annual Meeting. Those

three events really resonated with me about all of the wonderful work that so many lawyers are doing, both for individual members of society and for our system of justice. There are so many lawyers doing so many good things, and that is not adequately publicized or recognized in society at large. I am immensely grateful for all of the volunteer efforts by judges and members of the Bar toiling somewhat anonymously doing volunteer work that benefits society. Most people don't have any idea how many lawyers are involved in serving society so well.

**Journal:** I see you truly enjoy your work.

**Weimer:** One of the wonderful things about this job is that I get to meet some immensely talented and gifted and brilliant people, including lawyers, judges and professors, with whom I have developed wonderful friendships.

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