



Photos by Layla Garms  
Mark Rabil, co-director of the WFU Innocence and Justice Clinic talks with Dallas County District Attorney Craig Watkins (right).

## Dallas' first black DA shares innovative approach to crime fighting

BY LAYLA GARMS  
THE CHRONICLE

Craig Watkins made history in 2006 when he became the first African American in Texas history to be elected as a District Attorney.

Watkins continues to make waves with his decidedly different approach to prosecution. The Dallas County DA shared his insight and highlighted his office's approach to battling crime last week as part of Wake Forest School of Law's "Conversation With" series at Worrell Professional Center.

Mark Rabil, director of the law school's Innocence and Justice Clinic, which sponsored Watkins' visit along with the Black Law Student Association (BLSA), moderated a Q&A session with Watkins, who in true Texas fashion donned cowboy boots with his suit.

Over the course of his six-year tenure, Watkins has ushered in a new era for Dallas County, which is home to 84 different law enforcement agencies, by being what he calls "smart on crime."

"When you commit a crime, that time that you're incarcerated should be used to rehabilitate a person ... so that when that person comes back to our community, they'll be a law abiding citizen," Watkins said. "That's being smart on crime."

Though he has no official capacity to impact the state's educational system, Watkins says he works closely with stakeholders in education and other areas of society that he says have an indirect impact on crime rates. Lack of education is widely known to be statistically linked to a person's likelihood to become involved in criminal activity, so ensuring that students are properly educated is an important component in reducing crime in a state that is home to the largest prison population in America, Watkins said.

"In Texas, we spend \$64 a day to incarcerate a person but we only spend \$8 a day to educate them, so what do you expect? The (prison) populations are going to go up," Watkins said.

Watkins has overseen considerable innovative approaches such as the Convictions Integrity Unit, a two-man team of assistant district attorneys that he created during his first year in office to "review and re-investigate legitimate post conviction claims of innocence in accordance with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure." The unit, which is thought to be the first of its kind in the country, has secured 33 exoner-



Forsyth County DA Jim O'Neill (left) converses with Watkins after the program.

ations since its inception in 2007, more than three times the number of the entire state of North Carolina.

"We're the DA's office - we prosecuted the case, we have the file, so we can just go get the file out of storage and retrace our steps," Watkins said. "... You have (innocence) projects within Texas and here, and you have defense attorneys. Largely, their goal is to represent their client, whether they're innocent or guilty. Our goal is different - our goal is to find the truth. It just lends legitimacy to the whole process."

Other cities, including Brooklyn and Manhattan, N.Y., Denver, Colo. and Santa Clara, Calif., have followed Dallas' lead by forming their own Conviction Integrity Units.

Despite being opposed to the death penalty, Watkins has prosecuted eight capital cases in his career, securing convictions in seven of them. He has also appointed a team of prosecutors to help him decide in which cases the DA's office should pursue what he calls "the ultimate punishment."

"It doesn't make a difference what I believe," he said. "The law says if you commit a certain crime, you're eligible for the ultimate punishment."

Watkins scoffed when Rabil asked whether he feels race and ethnicity play a role in the criminal justice system.

"Anyone who doesn't believe that is naive. If you look at the history, race has played a part in pretty much all aspects of life, particularly with the criminal justice system," he declared. "Obviously, race played a part - it still plays a part - in our criminal justice system."

Watkins, whose office boasts a near-perfect conviction rate, requires the law enforcement agencies that report to him to follow strict procedures with

respect to building cases against defendants, including video recording interrogations in virtually every case. The Texas Wesleyan University School of Law alumnus says he took office because he wanted to bring about real change in the criminal justice system.

"You can only do so much as a defense attorney," he said. "As a DA, I have more power and control to impact the system. That's why I chose to be a DA."

Watkins has recently proposed a Racial Justice Act in Texas, which is modeled after North Carolina's own act, which allowed defendants who felt that race played a significant role in the prosecutor's decision to seek the death penalty against them to have their cases reviewed in a court of law. Ironically, North Carolina Senators voted the day of Watkins' visit to repeal NC's Act, which was sponsored by then-Reps. Larry Womble and Earline Parmon, who now serves in the state senate. Darryl Hunt, the Winston-Salem man who spent nearly two decades in prison for a murder he did not commit, said that April 4 was a sad day for the state of North Carolina.

"North Carolina is going to suffer. People are going to die just because of their race, the color of their skin, and that's a shame. We're supposed to be about justice and we have a legislative body that doesn't care about justice," he said in response to the repeal. "... North Carolina has 10 (exonerations) and yet even with those 10, they are rolling back the laws to make it harder to free innocent men and women. They would rather kill them than admit that they have made a mistake."

Rabil, Hunt's former attorney, said hearing Watkins' story was heartening to him, even in the face of what many see as regressive legislation.

"I'm really happy the students were able to get him to come here and spread the word that prosecutors can see things not

only as cases to win but justice to be done," Rabil said, adding that he is hopeful North Carolina DA's will someday follow Watkins' lead.

Forsyth County DA Jim O'Neill, who supported and fought for the repeal of the Racial Justice Act, was among those on hand to hear Watkins speak.

Third year law student and Dallas native Jason Hornsby led the charge to bring Watkins to Wake Forest.

"Seeing him become the first African American, that was just a historic accomplishment and something that's noteworthy, especially in Dallas," Hornsby said. "That was something that was inspirational for me."



Randy Voller with Alma Adams and Louis Duke.

## Adams: GOP will get fight they are seeking

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

On Monday, North Carolina Democratic Party (NCDP) Chair Randy Voller, Rep. Alma Adams (D-Guilford) and College Democrats of North Carolina (CDNC) President Louis Duke called on Governor Pat McCrory and the Republican leadership in the General Assembly to rein in extreme legislative proposals that they say would infringe on the voting rights of North Carolinians.

"This is the story of the seven deadly attacks on your right to vote: requiring photo ID to vote, cutting early voting, ending same-day registration, taxing parents working to put their kids through college, disenfranchising ex-felons, banning so-called mentally 'incompetent' voters and ending straight-ticket voting," Voller quipped at the Raleigh news conference. "Limiting choice and making it more inconvenient to vote is an infringement on personal freedom."

Adams said

Republicans should learn from their colleagues in other states.

"We've already seen the systematic failure of curbing early voting in other battleground states," she said. "Why then would we emulate such failures for our own voters? If it's a fight Republicans want, to limit the freedom to vote, it's a fight they're going to get."

Speaking to a host of legislation that would impose a tax increase on working families fighting to send their kids to college, including S.B. 666 and S.B. 667, Duke, a Campbell University student, remarked that college students had a vested interest in their communities and a vested interest in exercising their right to vote within those communities.

"North Carolina Republicans are so desperate to suppress the youth vote in our state that they are willing to increase taxes on our hardworking parents, so that we will have less access to the ballot box," Duke said.

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