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# Fezell's name spurs argument



Staff Photo — Mike James  
Vic Fezell discusses his career

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Vic Fezell points to the painting across from his cluttered desk in his cozy office on the third floor of the McLennan County Courthouse Annex.

"You see that picture of John Wayne," the youthful district attorney says. "When I get in a tight, I ask, 'What would John Wayne have done?'"

He chuckles and adds, "With this Lucas thing, I've been looking at John Wayne a lot."

And the answer Fezell has been getting is clear. He resumed a grand jury investigation Friday into convicted murderer Henry Lee Lucas' confessions to two McLennan County murders and others elsewhere.

The investigation has brought statewide and national attention to McLennan County and Fezell, but it also has drawn the ire of law officers including the famed Texas Rangers, who headed a statewide task

force overseeing the Lucas cases.

To many critics and supporters, it may seem pure coincidence that Fezell's investigation of the Rangers' handling of the Lucas cases is occurring in the home county of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame.

But Fezell's friends and enemies suggest it's more than circumstance. They say it's only fitting for the 33-year-old prosecutor, who has a track record for controversial and sometimes unpopular pursuits.

"It fits the mold," Fezell's former law partner, Dick Kettler, said of the Lucas investigation.

Kettler watched Fezell, fresh out of Baylor law school, win a controversial lawsuit with the then-largest jury verdict in county history against a well-known bank just down the block from their law office.

Friends say Fezell's hard-nosed aggressiveness as a self-made lawyer tempered with his smooth charisma as a predestined Baptist preacher combine to make him an attractive upholder of right over wrong,

good over evil. And that means he'll always face confrontations.

Detractors say his heavy-handedness and polished mannerisms, along with a hungry ego, make him a natural politician out to serve an immense ambition by using his office to capture attention.

But critics and allies agree Victor Frederick Fezell has been quite successful at both — overcoming confrontations and garnering headlines.

The mold actually was set in McLennan County when Fezell took on Waco City Councilman David Dow before he finished law school in 1979. He lost the race despite a surprising showing, and the experience proved worthwhile.

He came back three years later to unseat six-year District Attorney Felipe Reyna in an upset Democratic primary victory. Fezell fought off Republican Paul Gartner in a bitter general election contest

Please see FRIENDS, Page 2

that left political wounds for both supporters and opponents.

Once in office, Feazell wasted no time in challenging county commissioners to give him more money and space to operate his office. He is still fighting for those additions.

He also irked many defense lawyers with his new security policies designed to prevent them from freely strolling into his assistants' offices. Friends jokingly printed bumper stickers saying, "I visited Fort Feazell."

Later, a grand jury investigation under Feazell's guidance brought a shakeup in the state Department of Human Resources' child abuse and neglect section at its local office.

In the Lake Waco triple slayings, Feazell's dogged prosecution has resulted in two death penalties and four life-in-prison sentences — and several disgruntled defense attorneys who turned on him.

The list goes on. His office's investigation of child abuse within the Waco Independent School District strained relations with school officials. Feazell says he's "coming back" to the WISD case when he has time.

His decision earlier this year to accept Waco Police Department cases involving search warrants only with his office's prior approval angered narcotics agents and police. The order came after a state judge threw out a warrant in an high-stakes drug raid.

Feazell acknowledges his list of enemies — and accompanying political pressure — is growing. But he considers it an expected result of his passion for what he believes is right and his commitment to being an active prosecutor.

"I know I've got a mounting enemy list," Feazell said in a recent interview, "but I think the general population of McLennan County is smart enough to know what's going on."

"A lot of people out there appreciate what I'm doing. If it ever gets to the point where they don't, then I'll be gone. At least while I've been sitting in this chair, I feel I've made an impact — I think a positive impact."

Others offer conflicting assessments.

"The man needs to concentrate his efforts on being the district attorney and not running for some other office," said Reyna, now a private attorney. "(Being active) is what he said he was going to do, and he's done it to the detriment of McLennan County."

Reyna, who has no plans to seek the office again though he says he is constantly urged to run against Feazell next year, claims the district attorney's office is disorganized and inexperienced.

Feazell discounts those charges, but admits his way of running the office is quite different from his predecessor's and perhaps what others would prefer.

"I'm serious about what I'm doing here," he said, "and I wish there were more people who were concerned about doing what's right regardless of the consequences, instead of looking for the easy way out."

"That's one of the things that's wrong with our whole country, with our world right now, because we're always looking for the compromise. I don't think you can compromise with evil."

Feazell views hideous crimes, such as severe child abuse and capital murder, as evil. It is a belief deeply rooted in his upbringing.

Born the son of a Baptist preacher in Northeast Louisiana, he grew up in the parsonage with a bit of a "hellfire and brimstone" atmosphere. His father, the Rev.

Attorney General Robert Kennedy's run for president.

Feazell first showed signs of a career in law enforcement when he enrolled in cadet training at the Austin Police Department in 1968. He was the only student of 30 to land a position, but he kept it for only a year.

At the urging of a police officer he befriended, Feazell decided to seek a college degree. His father helped him enter Mary Hardin-Baylor College in Belton as one of about 12 "campus boys."

While attending college, he took a job as a counselor in the Bell County Juvenile Probation Department. At the same time, he became an ordained minister and pastor of the small Dyess Grove Baptist Church outside Temple.

"I tell people that's why I'm so good at jury argument now, because most of the congregations I preached to were about 12 people," Feazell said.

Even critics agree that his preaching ability has served him well.

"He has a very polished and glib delivery," said Waco attorney Russell Hunt, a widely known opponent of Feazell who defended David Wayne Spence in the Lake Waco capital murder conviction.

Feazell also said he learned a lesson from his move in 1971 to a better paying pastorate at Elm Grove Baptist Church in Belton. It's one to which he now refers when talk of higher public office arises.

"Just because it's bigger don't mean it's better," Feazell said.

But his interest in law began to overtake any call to the ministry when he worked under Walter J. Minica at the probation department. From Minica, Feazell said, he learned about the intricacies of government and politics.

It was not until halfway into his senior year at Mary Hardin Baylor when Feazell decided to seek a law degree at Baylor. After first being told he couldn't be accepted immediately, Feazell later was pulled from a waiting list and admitted.

The approval caught him by surprise and with little money, he said, partly because his wife had just had an emergency appendectomy with no insurance coverage.

With a bachelor's degree in social work and religion, a counseling job in Belton and a pastorate, Feazell started law school. He lasted only two quarters, being forced to quit and raise more money through a full-time job with Bell County's Youth Services Department.

He worked there for about a year before moving to Waco and becoming a "bottom-line, \$6,000-a-year social worker" for the Mental Health Mental Retardation Center.

He gained the confidence of his supervisor at MHMR and was given his first serious challenge — to run a new drug abuse treatment program after a scandal over the deaths of two clients in MHMR's methadone treatment program for heroin addicts.

Under Feazell, the program improved from last to first place in the governor's office ratings of MHMR drug programs.

But the task perhaps had served as a special challenge to Feazell because he was charged with persuading people to avoid what he admittedly had done as a teenager in Leander — experiment with drugs.

During both his MHMR tenure and previous youth work, Feazell said his own short-lived experience with marijuana and LSD proved an effective tool in scaring others away from drugs.

When his drug use became an issue in the 1982 general election, Feazell openly acknowledged his