

The Texas Lawbook

Free Speech, Due Process and Trial by Jury

From Risk to Reckoning: How a Dallas Lawyer's Long Fight Delivered Vindication

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Dallas attorney Laura Benitez Geisler knew exactly what taking Terry Bevill's case would entail.

Across from her sat Bevill, a former police captain who had been fired, arrested and charged with a felony after signing an affidavit that questioned whether a coworker could receive a fair trial in Wood County.

Geisler knew the lawsuit would target some of East Texas' most powerful officials. Suing a sitting district judge, a district attorney and a sheriff was not something she took lightly.

The legal odds were daunting. The political risks were obvious.

So, during Bevill's second visit to her 14th-floor Dallas office, Geisler asked a simple question. Given everything that happened to him — being fired from his job, losing the health insurance his ailing wife desperately needed and being arrested and charged with a third-degree felony that loomed over him for 16 months — would he do it again?

Bevill didn't hesitate.

"Yes, Miss Laura, I would," Bevill replied.

Why?

"Because it was the right thing to do," he told her. "I took an oath to protect and defend the Constitution, and I maintained my oath. Those men did not."

At that moment, Geisler said she decided to represent him.

"If that man had that much courage to stand up for what he believed," she recalled, "I had an equal responsibility as a lawyer to make sure he was represented."



Laura Benitez Geisler and Terry Bevill (Photo by Mark Smith/The Texas Lawbook)

"Terry was a good person," added Geisler, a partner at Sommerman, McCaffity, Quesada & Geisler in Dallas. "I wanted to help him, but I also wanted to know whether it would be worth it for him. So we're not wasting anyone's time and don't get poured out right away."

Geisler had to evaluate whether Bevill had a valid legal claim, given the immunity issues that applied — judicial immunity, prosecutorial immunity, and Bevill's First Amendment rights as a public official — and whether his speech was protected.

"I had to thread the needle legally," she said. "It was a huge bar."

Like any law firm, she also had to evaluate the cost of handling such a case, including the likelihood of recovering any damages if successful.

The case would become part of a

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seven-year legal battle that involved thousands of hours of legal work, survived two trips to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, and pitted a small-town police captain against some of East Texas' most influential public officials — ultimately leading to a \$21.35 million federal jury verdict, though much of it would prove difficult to collect.

In an interview, Geisler told *The Texas Lawbook* that Bevill had suffered “a tremendous loss for doing the right thing.”

“For me, filing a lawsuit was such an important step,” said Geisler. “Public officials are given a lot of trust. And whenever they violate that trust, the only way I think to right the wrong is to hold them accountable. And filing the lawsuit was the first step in holding them to account publicly by calling them out about what they did.”

Bevill was the first witness called at the federal trial in Sherman. “I felt like a brand new man when I walked out,” he said. “It was off my shoulders.”

Bevill said Geisler warned him the legal battle would be difficult.

“At the start of it, Miss Laura said we were in for a long haul,” Bevill said, “and we don't know where it is going because there are so many obstacles. Everything they threw in front of her, she jumped it like a jack rabbit. They couldn't shut her down. But she was in the right. That made it just a little bit easier.”

The lawsuit stemmed from events that began on June 2, 2017, when Bevill signed an affidavit supporting a request by a coworker and former Wood County jail administrator, David McGee, to move his criminal trial out of Wood County.

The affidavit by Bevill, attached to a motion for a change of venue filed on behalf of McGee, claimed that the jail administrator could not receive a fair trial in Wood County because of overly close relationships among the sheriff, the state district attorney and the judge.

Bevill's suit contended he was fired shortly thereafter by David Dobbs, then the mayor of Quitman, because of pressure from Tom Castloo, then the

Wood County sheriff; Jim Wheeler, the district attorney at the time; and Jeff Fletcher, who then presided over the state district court for Wood County — the three officials Bevill identified in the affidavit by office, though not by name, as comprising a “dangerous combination” of “influential persons.”

The controversy escalated after McGee was convicted in a criminal trial.

Judge Fletcher issued a warrant charging Bevill with aggravated perjury based on statements contained in the affidavit. Bevill surrendered to authorities, was booked into jail and spent hours in custody before being released on bond under a series of restrictions, including surrendering firearms and obtaining permission before leaving Wood County.

The criminal case lingered for more than a year before being presented to a grand jury. In October 2018, the grand jury declined to indict Bevill, effectively ending the prosecution.

Dobbs, Castloo, Wheeler and Fletcher were all defendants in the federal lawsuit, along with the city of Quitman and Wood County. After a six-day trial in September 2024, the eight-member jury found that Mayor Dobbs retaliated against Bevill for exercising his First Amendment rights and that Fletcher, Wheeler, Castloo, Dobbs and the city of Quitman conspired to bring about his termination.

The jury exonerated only the county, of which Quitman is the seat. The other defendants were found collectively liable for \$18 million in compensatory damages and \$3.35 million in punitive damages.

In closing arguments, Geisler described Castloo, Wheeler and Fletcher as a “trilogy of power” in the largely rural East Texas county.

During the trial, the defense downplayed Bevill's damages, characterizing them as at most “hurt feelings, anger and frustration” from being fired.

Geisler, however, called the allegations “an absurd statement” after Bevill had been arrested, jailed, released under strict restrictions and lost his reputation and

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livelihood as a Texas peace officer.

Despite being promised that he would remain covered by health insurance for three months after being fired, Bevill learned that the policy had been cancelled during his wife's clinic visit.

"Terry was at one of the lowest points of his life," Geisler said. "He put his last bit of money into the car to get to Dallas for his wife's doctor's appointment — only to discover his insurance had been canceled. He had to tell his wife, 'I can't pay five hundred dollars.'"

After the federal lawsuit was filed in Sherman, Geisler noticed changes in Bevill's demeanor.

"I noticed how important it was for Terry to tell his story," she said. "The transformation when he came to my office when I said I would take his case and when the lawsuit was filed, you could see him regain a little bit of his dignity. He was so appreciative that someone heard him."

"I didn't know if I could get a remedy for him. But I knew he needed to be heard."

Geisler said Bevill took the stand as their first witness. She said that when he got off the stand, "it was like seeing a complete transformation of the man. It was like he grew six inches."

Bevill acknowledged that he felt like "a brand new man" after testifying. "Just wanted to tell my story," he recalled. "I wanted my side heard. ... It was off my shoulders."

During the federal trial, Geisler also said she had "no idea what I was going to ask for in damages" other than to say Bevill was "seeking millions."

However, she said that when her co-counsel Sean McCaffity questioned Fletcher, the former state district judge, on the witness stand, he "threw me a softball."

When Fletcher was asked whether he would accept \$10 million to be illegally arrested, he answered "no." He also testified that he considered the price of freedom to be "pretty much" priceless.

Although a federal jury awarded Bevill a total of \$21.35 million, Geisler said she knew they would be limited in

their ability to collect. Instead, the city of Quitman has agreed to a \$1.22 million settlement, and all defendants have settled out for an undisclosed sum.

In all, she said her law firm billed for 2,200 hours, though it "probably charged for only a quarter" of the hours spent on the case.

"I've certainly handled cases with horrific catastrophic injuries that resulted in verdicts or settlements where financially it was more lucrative for me," said Geisler, who has spent 29 years advocating for clients in catastrophic personal injury, wrongful death, product liability and civil rights cases. "This case was never about that."

"I have gone up against large corporations with tremendous resources to fight me with and defendants who would go to the ends of the earth to avoid accountability for the harm they caused to another," she said.

"But never have I gone up against public officials who used their positions of power to weaponize the justice system to retaliate against a man who — consistent with his oath — chose to speak up in defense of the constitutional rights of another."

After reaching a settlement, the City of Quitman issued a proclamation this week honoring Bevill, who has continued to live there.

"Terry deserves to end his career and this chapter in his life with the recognition he probably deserves," Geisler said.

"He's a hero," she added. "To have the courage to stand up like that. He stood firm. Despite all the suffering, he said he would do it again. I think that tells you a lot about Terry Bevill."