

# An Interview with Chief Justice Mullins and His Vision of Judicial Independence

By JAMES T. (TIM) SHEARIN

**H**on. Raheem L. Mullins was confirmed by the General Assembly as the Chief Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court on January 28, 2025. Prior to that, he served as a Justice of the Supreme Court, as an Appellate Court Judge from 2014 to 2017 and as a Superior Court Judge from 2012 to 2014. He began his career as a law clerk to the Honorable Frederick L. Brown of the Massachusetts Appellate Court and then moved to Connecticut where he was a prosecutor in the Appellate Bureau of the Division of Criminal Justice and as an assistant attorney general in the Child Protection Division.

*I had the opportunity to sit with Justice Mullins and explore a wide variety of topics that provides insight into who he is as a person, judge and now the head of the Judicial Branch. The summary of our interview is below.*

## What inspired you to become a lawyer?

Frankly, I had no interest in becoming a lawyer my entire life. It was not until I was in my junior year at Clark University that I watched an episode of *Law & Order*. I became intrigued. I grabbed an LSAT prep book, did some practice exams, and decided then and there I would become a lawyer as my career. I later told that story to one of my law school professors. She told me I should come up with a better one. I have not. That is the truth on how I started my career.

**Who has shaped your personal and professional life?** My parents were a huge influence on me, my father in particular. Neither of my parents went to college. In fact, no one in my family had ever gone to college. My father was an electrician and

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worked at Pratt & Whitney for fifty years, and when he wasn't there, he was helping out neighbors with their electrical needs. I admired his work ethic and the fact that he was always there for me no matter how busy he was. His father was never around so he was made it up as he went along. He was an incredible man and an incredible father, and I have tried to be the same type of father to my children.

As for my professional career, Justice Lubbie Harper has had a profound influence on me. When I was a lawyer and appeared before him in the Appellate Court, he was incredibly tough. I had concluded he just did not like me, which caused me to prepare, and then prepare more, and then still prepare more. He made me a better lawyer. After I became a judge, we became very close. I have always admired him for not only what he accomplished as a judge, but as importantly, who he was as a person. He came from a humble background and never forgot who he was. To this day he still is very involved in improving New Haven and helping those who need it.

**Do you have a judicial philosophy?** I do not subscribe to any particular philosophy such as being an originalist or textualist. When I am pressed, I answer that I try to show judicial restraint. In my decisions, I try to address the particular issue facing the court based upon the facts that are presented and the controlling law, while appreciating how my ruling will affect the bar and the public. I try not to overwrite or decide issues that are before me. I believe judges get in trouble when they try to write a broad statement of the law and then find that the facts change; the broad statement suddenly does not look as good.

**Is there a particular case that stands out in your mind as reflecting that judicial restraint?** I recall a case when I was in the Appellate Court, *In re Henry*, which involved a young man who had fled Honduras because of violence. His mother had filed petitions requesting removal of the child's father as guardian and replacing her boyfriend and special juvenile immigration status. She sought emergency relief so the Petitioner could be heard before the child turned eighteen. The peti-

tions were denied by the Probate Court. The mother then appealed to the juvenile court. The young man turned eighteen years old before the court had decided the petitions. Then existing Supreme Court precedent said that the juvenile court had no jurisdiction once a person reached the age of eighteen and therefore the petitions were denied at the trial court level. It came before a panel of the Appellate Court. We struggled because we knew that affirming the decision would likely return the young man to the violence he fled in Honduras. Nevertheless, as the Appellate Court, we had little choice given existing precedence. The majority of the panel affirmed the decision, even though personally, we didn't like it. The mother and young man filed a petition for certiorari to the Supreme Court, which they accepted, and then reversed our decision holding that the precedence we relied on was not controlling and concluded the petitioner should not be held accountable for the delays in the judicial process they experienced.

**Had you been on the Supreme Court, would you have ruled the same way as it did?** Maybe—I am not 100% sure, but I would have thought about it differently. While I believe that stare decisis is important and precedence should not be lightly overturned, sitting on the Supreme Court allows us to have a little more freedom than appellate or trial court judges as to how a case should be decided. I certainly would have looked at the case with that different lens.

**What do you know now as an Appellate judge you wish you knew as a Superior Court judge?** Superior Court judges often worry about whether they will get reversed. Having been an Appellate Court judge and now a justice of the Supreme Court, I have come to understand that sometimes it just boils down to different judges viewing an issue differently. It does not mean that the Superior Court judge made a mistake. At the Supreme Court, we just happen to have the last word. If I were telling the Superior Court judges anything, I would tell them to decide cases based upon what the law dictates and not worry about what an appellate court might do.

**As Chief Justice you represent the Judicial Branch, what are your priorities?** First and foremost, technology. We recently refurbished the old Appellate Court to allow for the digital presentation of evidence. It is very impressive. Our hope is to have a digitally equipped courtroom in every judicial district. We are also working to make sure we have Wi-Fi in each of the courthouses. Second, as importantly, I also want to focus on access to justice. Third, I want to reinvigorate our staff and have people understand the importance of what we do. I think the rule of law is under attack and they should understand how important it is, and we are, to society.

**Let me explore that last point further. How do you define the rule of law and how do you, as head of the third branch of government in Connecticut, make sure it is paramount in everything the branch does?** At base, the rule of law is our system of checks and balances, the laws we live by. It is one of the founding principles of our country. When we started this country, one of the things we were dead set against was the notion that the “king wins.” “You’re going to do this and there is no arguing against it; there’s no appeal.” Our founders had a real problem with that. The judiciary is the counter-majoritarian branch. It is a check to make sure that no branch becomes too powerful. It is vitally important to our governmental system, to the fabric of our country and to who we are. The more that is attacked, the more we attack the very ideas of our country. Unfortunately, not everyone fully appreciates this nor how damaging ignoring the rule of law and our system’s checks and balances will be to those things we hold dear in this country; it’s what sets us apart. Part of the problem is education. It is important to me as leader of the Branch to make sure people understand this. We have a civics program where are judges and lawyers visit schools, usually the sixth grade, to speak about the rule of law and why it is important. We need to do more to get out into the community and make sure everyone appreciates the importance that the Judicial Branch plays in society. I speak frequently to people about why it is important to serve on jury duty so they know how the court process works. We also have to ad-

dress the prevalence of social media. It is a great thing but often disseminates misinformation. For that reason, it is important to me to be at the forefront of educating people in what we do, including the people we serve. I want those who interact with the court to feel like they have been heard and their case has resolved timely and they have been treated fairly. That interaction will help people’s perception of the Judicial Branch and the rule of law. People need to understand that the court system is theirs and we need to make sure that their interaction with it is positive.

**One of the things you just mentioned was misinformation. Chief Justice Roberts devoted much of his 2024 Report on the Federal Judiciary to the importance of judicial independence and pointed to four threats to judicial independence: 1) violence; 2) intimidation through unjustified attacks on the court by public officials; 3) disinformation in the form of distorted explanations of the factual and legal basis for decisions; and 4) the threatened and actual defiance of judgments. Do you share his concerns?** I do. They all worry me. The last one worries me in a sort of existential way because the stock and trade and the power of the Judicial Branch is the respect it holds in society; it is its integrity. It does not have an army. We say this is what the law is and people abide by it. I believe they abide by it because of the respect and integrity the judges and Judicial Branch have. If we start disobeying or advocating disobeying court orders then we will erode the foundation of the system of government that we have. Judges need to understand that their decisions might not be popular. That is the point of the Judicial Branch. As I said, we are the counter-majoritarian branch. That does not mean we should editorialize or be political in our rulings. We should not do so because that is where people lose respect for us. But it does mean we should do what the law dictates even if others might not like it.

**One of the things that Chief Justice Roberts said, and you have alluded to in your comments, is judges cannot be political; they are constrained, as you mentioned, in making broad pronouncements. But**

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## President's Message *Continued from page 5*

some would say that hampers the ability of the third branch of government to flex the muscle that the Constitution gives it. Is there a role for the bar to play in helping the Branch defend its independence by taking those decisions and perhaps adding the “editorialization” the court has not done? Absolutely. In my view, I think that is one of the roles of the bar. They can and have an ability to speak in a way that we do not, and I think the bar is viewed by the public as, I won’t say aligned with judges, but as part of that club, that system. Lawyers understand what decisions say and what they do not say in a way that sometimes journalists reporting on a case or a lay person reading it does not understand. So, I may read a story about a case, and say, “Let me see what hap-

pened there,” and then conclude that is not quite what happened. Lawyers have the ability to set the record straight and, in a sense, advocate. I think that does strengthen or help strengthen the rule of law because lawyers are a party of upholding the rule of law.

**How do you unwind?** It used to be golf, but I do not find much time to do that anymore. My youngest son is ten years old, and he just discovered basketball. So, if we are not playing outdoors when the weather permits, we are playing Nerf basketball in the house. I also played soccer in college, have coached my daughter’s team, and enjoy playing with her. Between the two of them and the rest of my family, I stay pretty busy and enjoy every minute of it. ■

## Wellness *Continued from page 31*

To register and view the full event schedule, go to [ctbar.org/Well-BeingSummit](http://ctbar.org/Well-BeingSummit).

### A Call to Action for the Legal Community

The legal field has long emphasized success, productivity, and client service, often at the expense of personal well-being. However, studies show that lawyers who prioritize their mental and physical health perform better in their roles, demonstrate improved decision-making abilities, and experience greater job satisfaction. Additionally, firms and organizations that invest in well-being initiatives benefit from increased retention, higher morale, and enhanced workplace culture.

The CBA encourages all legal professionals to take proactive steps toward their own wellness, recognizing that a balanced, healthy lawyer is an asset to clients, colleagues, and the justice system as a whole. This summit provides a crucial opportunity to learn strat-

egies for reducing stress, fostering resilience, and achieving a fulfilling career in law without sacrificing well-being.

Join us in prioritizing well-being and celebrating a healthier, more balanced legal community! ■



**Joan Reed Wilson** is the managing partner of RWC, LLC, Attorneys and Counselors at Law, where she practices estate planning, elder law, probate, and real estate closings. She holds a Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology from Penn and is a Certified Adult Chair® Coach.



**Sara Bonaiuto** is an associate at Shipman & Goodwin LLP, where she is a member of the firm’s Commercial Finance and Business and Corporate practice groups and the Cannabis Industry Team. Her practice is focused on assisting businesses and individuals with equity and debt financings, term and revolving credit facilities, entity formations, mergers and acquisitions, construction financing, real estate joint ventures and general contract matters.

## News & Events *Continued from page 8*

Town of North Stonington Board of Finance. He is a member of the CBA Workers’ Compensation Section.

**Christine M. Conley** is an attorney with McGann Bartlett and Brown LLC, where she represents employers and municipalities in defending work-related injuries. She previously served the 40th Assembly District of Groton and New London in the Connecticut House of Representatives. She is a Connecticut board certified workers’ compensation specialist and a member of the CBA Workers’ Compensation Section.

**Colette Griffin** is a partner with Strunk Dodge Aiken Zovas LLC and serves on the workers’ compensation legal advisory and medical advisory committees. She is a member and past chair of both the CBA Workers’ Compensation and Animal Law Sections and is also a member of the Women in the Law Section.

**Governor Lamont also nominated attorneys** David G. Bothwell, Jesse Giddings, Donald R. Green, Kaitlin A. Halloran, Angeline Ioannou, and Daniel Shapiro to the Connecticut superior court as well as Attorney LeAnn Neal for the position of family support magistrate.

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