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Team Player

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A photograph of Richard Cullen, a middle-aged man with short grey hair, wearing a dark blue suit, a light blue shirt, and a red patterned tie. He is smiling and standing in front of a blurred cityscape with tall buildings.

TEAM PLAYER

*From the field to the courtroom,
Cullen fights for his own*

BY KELLEY BRUSS

The same things that almost made **Richard Cullen '71** a football coach make him the lawyer he is today: teamwork, competition and people who need him.

Cullen is a partner at McGuireWoods, where he recently completed eleven years as chairman. A political observer calls him “one of the most prominent lawyers in the nation,” a statement confirmed by his client list, which includes Vice President Mike Pence.

Cullen, a member of Furman’s Board of Trustees, is known for his commitment to personal engagement with everyone from family and friends to clients and colleagues.

“Richard has a remarkable ability to stay connected with many people who want to be connected with him, who seek his advice and good judgment,” says Anne Marie Whittemore, one of his McGuireWoods partners.

He’s also a father who takes a call in the middle of an interview to hear how a

work situation is playing out for one of his children. “He’s so good at relationships and caring about others,” says his son **Richard Cullen '07**.

His father taught him by example that people and professional passions aren’t mutually exclusive. “You can work hard and have a successful career and also be a good dad and a good husband and a good son and a good brother,” the younger Cullen says.

Cullen still finds the work as invigorating as he first did 40 years ago. “I love solving problems,” he says. “I don’t stress out over taking people’s troubles and making them mine. I enjoy that.”

But he also recognizes the role his ability to connect has played in his career. “To the extent that I’ve been successful as a

lawyer, it’s been about relationships,” he says.

The student

Law wasn’t always his passion. If anything could lay claim to that title, it might be football.

Cullen grew up in Staunton, Virginia, and was being recruited by the Virginia Military Institute during high school. But when they suddenly lost interest, he was adrift. His coach made a call to a friend, who happened to be Bob King, the head football coach at Furman. There were no scholarships left, but Cullen was invited to come on his own dime and play.

He studied political science. But the truth is, his Furman years were primarily about the team. “I was just a jock, basically,” says Cullen, a wide receiver who spent a fair amount of time warming the bench. “I thought I was better than the coaches thought I was,” he says, laughing.

After graduation he was offered a coaching job at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. The offer included an enticing scholarship to Cumberland Law School. But Cullen sensed it was time to choose. “I needed to decide: Was I going to be a football coach or was I going to be a lawyer?”

He made the call and enrolled at the University of South Carolina School of Law.

One year into the program, the dean brought Cullen into his office and observed that he could use some time to mature. The dean suggested he take a year off. But Cullen said he didn’t think he would. “And the dean said, ‘I’m not really asking.’”

Cullen went back to Staunton and his old summer job as a stringer for the local paper, *The News Leader*. He’d said good-bye to football and, it seemed, to law as well.

As a young reporter, he had nowhere to hide when a politician came to town, as the senior writers didn’t like to cover the visits. One day, Cullen took such an assignment and met M. Caldwell Butler, a Republican candidate for Congress.

Two weeks later he was asked to serve as press secretary for the remainder of the campaign. He stayed on after Butler’s victory and was working for him when the congressman cast a key Republican impeachment vote against President Richard Nixon.

Butler was instrumental in encouraging Cullen to go back to law school. “It felt like unfinished business,” Cullen says. “It was something I needed to do because of the South Carolina experience.”

He enrolled in the University of Richmond’s T. C. Williams School of Law and graduated in 1977.

The lawyer

One of Cullen’s adjunct professors worked at McGuireWoods and encouraged him to interview with the firm when he finished school. Whittemore was a member of the hiring committee at the time. “I remember

him as a very bright young man,” she says. “And I mean bright intellectually and in his enthusiasm and energy.”

And that’s the same man she still works with today.

Cullen has held appointed political positions twice, serving about eight months as Virginia’s attorney general and two years as U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, until Democratic President Bill Clinton took office and cleared the way for his own nominees. It’s a date Cullen won’t forget. “I was fired by Bill Clinton on March 25, 1993,” he says, smiling.

Except for those periods, he has spent his entire career with McGuireWoods. As his prominence has grown, so have the titles attached to his clients: mayor, governor, senator, and now, vice president.

Last June, Cullen visited the White House three times for interviews before being retained by Pence to represent him in the Russia probe. “You can’t pretend that was normal,” he says.

Still, he’s doing the same job he always does: aggressively representing a client he believes in. “Fundamentally, it’s the same thing,” he says.

The mentor

For about a decade Cullen has helped provide a summer internship for a Furman student at McGuireWoods Consulting, an arm of the law firm.

Brandon Boykin ’12 was studying pre-law and political science, and playing football, when someone introduced him to Cullen, who then invited Boykin to intern in Richmond. He also shared meals with Cullen’s family and went to church with them.

After finishing law school in 2016, Boykin spent a year at the Raleigh office of McGuireWoods. Then, on Cullen’s advice, he pursued a position in the district attorney’s office to gain trial experience. “He was helping me grow, not only as a person but as a lawyer,” Boykin says.



Richard Cullen, Superior Court Judge Reuben Young, Brandon Boykin ’12 and former North Carolina Governor Michael Easley at Boykin’s swearing-in ceremony for the position of assistant district attorney for Wake County.

When he was sworn in as an assistant DA for Wake County in fall 2017, Cullen was there to introduce him to the court and hold the Bible while he took the oath of office.

The evangelist

Cullen is an all-in kind of guy. “My dad has what I would call healthy obsessions,” his son says.

Besides the law and his family – his wife, Aggie, whom he married in 1973; four children; and nine grandchildren, with No. 10 on the way – Furman takes a place of prominence among those obsessions.

“He’s an evangelist for Furman,” the younger Cullen says.

That wasn’t always the case. “There was a period of time where it was more of a memory than an active part of who I am,” Cullen says.

Things changed when his older son, Thomas, started looking at colleges. David Shi, president of Furman at the time, had played football with Cullen. He met the family when they came to campus for a visit. “He looked at my son and said, ‘We’ve already got your bed picked out,’” Cullen remembers.

Thomas Cullen ’00 was sold. And a few years later, his father was named to the board – one more team to join. “I fell in love with Furman the second time,” Cullen says. ●

Cullen possesses a powerful combination of skills in both relationships and the law. He fuels them with a work ethic that people can’t help but notice.