At the mere age of 11, the elementary school classmates of John J. Curry Jr. could see his political leanings that would become a foundation of his adult life.

In 1964, while attending Resurrection Elementary School on Chicago’s West Side, Curry was the only student wearing a button in support of GOP presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.

“Most people aren’t conservative at that age, and this was at a Catholic school where the nuns were politically active and put pictures of John Kennedy on the wall,” remembered his lifelong friend and semiretired school teacher Steven Fischer.

Curry has built on that political contrarian streak throughout his career. Meanwhile, in his practice of law, he developed an indefatigable nature which now has him closing out a run as a shareholder at the Polsinelli law firm and later this year will make him a Cook County Circuit Court judge.

Curry believes his combined interest in law and politics was hardly a coincidence.

“When you read the history of American politics, there are so many leaders who came into it through the law. At least by the early 1960s, if there was any profession that fed political life, it was the law profession,” he says from his downtown office. Some files are on the floor, a picture of New York’s Federal Hall hangs on the wall, and an American flag is also displayed prominently. “If I had an interest in getting into politics, it seemed like law was an entrée into it.”

Politics was always dinner table conversation, as he believes it was in many Irish-American homes. His maternal grandfather, William Burke, was a Chicago police captain with many friends in politics. Curry’s father, a mechanical engineer who specialized in plastic closures, and his mother, a school librarian, also had an interest. Another key voice growing up was Oak Park lawyer Ed Stepnowski, the family’s friend and lawyer.

“He struck me as one of the more intellectual of my parents’ friends, and to some degree he made me think about becoming a lawyer,” Curry says of Stepnowski. “In time he became an adviser and mentor to me.”

After attending Resurrection Elementary, Curry then enrolled at St. Joseph’s High School in Westchester, where he would graduate fourth in his class. He was the oldest sibling with five younger sisters. He says his parents were very concerned about good moral grounding for their children and encouraged them to take school seriously and get college degrees.

“They were very interested in making sure that all of us got the best education possible,” he says.

But there were times to relax as well. For ex-

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ample, he spent portions of his early summers at his grandfather’s farm in what is now Carol Stream. His grandfather had pursued a lifelong dream to buy a dairy farm, and it was a gathering place for the Burke and Curry families. “It was a different experience than playing on the streets on the West Side of Chicago,” Curry says, especially when watching the herding and hand milking of the cows.

In grammar school and high school, Curry studied art and music, but he determined, in a manner encouraged by his parents, that careers in those fields would be too financially challenging, so he made the decision made by many other Irish-Americans and started looking into a career in law.

Developing a Love of Litigation

Now seeking a secular collegiate education, Curry stayed close to home by enrolling at Northwestern University where he majored in history and political science with law school being his goal. He attended Vanderbilt Law School in Nashville, Tenn. With the state legislature and Supreme Court close by, it allowed him and fellow students from all over the country to watch government and law in action.

Always intent on returning to Chicago, Curry started working as an associate at Karr, Moran & Felbinger, where he had clerked during the summers and developed an intense interest in litigation.

“It seemed the quintessence of the practice of law to advocate a client’s case in court,” Curry says. “I thought, ‘Isn’t that what law is all about’—dealing with the really critical issues that come up when parties simply can’t agree or there is conflict that has to be resolved by a court. The dynamic of investigating the facts of a case, developing a case, preparing arguments, and presenting a case in court, these are all things about trial practice that interested me greatly.’’

As he developed a love of litigation, where to practice became another question when Karr Moran & Felbinger folded. He was forced to seek a new position, and soon he was in a litigation practice at Schaffeneger Watson, an insurance defense firm.

At that firm he handled a pro bono case as a member of the ABA Indochinese Refugee Legal Assistance Program that led to a career highlight.

Curry represented three families in Chicago being evicted from their Section 8 housing. He believed his clients were victims of discriminatory practices and therefore wanted to get as much publicity as possible to shame the owners who were being paid their full rent. The families were being evicted solely due to the number of their children, which was not so large.

The publicity on the evening news and in the Chicago dailies forced the owners to make a favorable settlement. “I’m pretty proud of the result in that case,” Curry says. “The Vietnamese refugee community threw a party for me to thank me for my representation,” he says.

In 1981, Curry took a job as an assistant attorney general in the Illinois Attorney General’s Office. “I learned that if you wanted to get a lot of trial experience very quickly, you could get it in a government litigation office,” he says. “That is what I wanted to do at that point.”

Two years later, Curry was drawn to the nation’s capital to work for the Justice Department in the Civil Rights Division during the Reagan administration. “I found civil rights cases really interesting compared to the injury and negligence cases I had handled in private practice,” Curry says. “Civil rights litigation was exactly the kind of work I was doing for the Attorney General’s Office. The Special Litigation Section in Illinois represented state employees and agencies, and I litigated those kinds of cases for two years. I litigated civil rights cases in the Justice Department for three years.”

From D.C. to Western Suburbs

By 1986, the Justice Department—and the rest of the government—was starting to feel the effects of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Budget Act, and Curry started thinking his time in Washington and in government had run its course. At the same time, he was becoming more interested in business and commercial litigation.

He reached out to old friend Tom Fawell, who was part of a prominent DuPage County Republican family, to pick his brain regarding job prospects. Fawell gave Curry an offer on the spot to work in his Oak Brook office, and that allowed him to practice in the field of business and commercial litigation as he wanted.

“We did a lot of injunction work, and I became adept at TROs and preliminary injunctions,” Curry says. “We had some great successes for our clients.”

Curry was living in Clarendon Hills and was keeping his toe in the political waters as he was elected president of the village caucus. “That was quite a distinction. It is a sign of respect when the community lets you lead its caucus,” Curry says.

His professional career was about to take another twist when the Fawell firm in Oak Brook merged with Katten Muchin Rosenman in 1987, giving Curry the opportunity to work with a major firm’s litigation department. Then the 1990 real estate crash hit. The Oak Brook office was closed, Fawell left the practice of law, and Curry and the other attorneys were left without jobs.

Forced to move on, Curry started working as of counsel in a Chicago firm headed by GOP activist Joe Morris. He soon had another major triumph in Narcisi v. Blue Cross Blue Shield, in which he represented a cancer victim in a fraud claim against an insurance broker and won a six-figure award from a DuPage County jury.

“He has an extremely industrious and a wonderful work ethic,” Morris says of Curry. “If there is a job that needs to be done, he sticks to it until it is completed. I have seen him burn the candle at the law library looking for an answer. I am sure he will bring that to the bench.”

By 1993, Curry had an office in Northbrook. He had stayed in touch with Anthony Nasharr, whom he had gotten to know while working for Fawell. By 1998 the two decided to join forces, allowing Curry to expand his work in banking litigation.

Client Banked on His Advice

TCF Bank has been one of their prominent clients. In 1999, the bank found itself a victim of an inside job. A group of teenagers at Neuqua Valley High School had conspired with two young bank tellers to stage a phony armed robbery and steal thousands of dollars.

The bank wanted to find any avenue of recovery for the loss. Curry suggested TCF sue the parents of the teens under Illinois Parental Responsibility Act. The bank authorized Curry to sue, and the case resulted in a favorable settlement.

The firm’s representation of TCF Bank proved very beneficial for a lot of Chicago residents several years later after Curry and Nasharr joined Polsinelli in 2006.

In late 2006, TCF had a business customer who was trying to set up numerous Automated Clearing House accounts for its “employees.” The customer’s requests drew management’s suspicions, and Nasharr, Curry and an associate were brought into the matter by TCF’s in-house counsel to evaluate the situation. An emergency investigation revealed serious issues about the customer’s business and practices.

“We had a triage meeting with in-house counsel. By the time we got there, they were very concerned that this customer had engaged in unethical, if not criminal, conduct on the transaction,” Curry remembers. “I found out within 24 hours that the Securities Division of the Illinois Secretary of State’s Office was planning on a cease and desist order against the business. We believed that the bank had to act quickly to prevent loss.”

The business was the cover for a pyramid scheme in what became known as the “More Than Enough” case. TCF froze all of the accounts, and Curry filed an interpleader action in Cook County. A Highland Park man was sentenced in 2011 to 15 years in prison for bilking people out of nearly $11 million.

“It turned out this guy was exploiting people in South Side churches, and there were always 50 to 100 people coming to court every time the case came on the call because of that,” Curry says.

“TCF actually got a thank you from the Consumer Fraud Division of the Illinois Attorney General.”

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torney General’s Office, which had pled into the case to preserve the victims’ funds. Our client’s actions prevented dissipation of the victims’ money. It is very rare in pyramid scheme cases for investors to ever recover their money, so in this instance there was a substantial fund to compensate the people who were victimized by it.”

Curry’s career highlights include many cases where he has prevailed with millions of dollars on the line, but he also gets satisfaction out of the small cases.

“They are not big money cases, but either the amount of money involved or the claims in the case have a significant impact on people’s lives,” he says.

He cites the case of a young man with a family who was the manager of a new fast food outlet. Curry successfully argued the company had exploited him, and he secured nine months of back pay for the struggling family.

“It kept them out of bankruptcy, and they were very appreciative,” Curry says.

What Curry Brings to the Bench

With nearly four decades of practice under his belt, Curry talks about what he has learned about being a good commercial trial lawyer.

“You really have to pay attention to what the client’s needs are, and you have to understand the client,” he says. “When it comes to business, you have to understand the client’s business and appreciate its business objectives. Once you are able to do that, you have to be able to craft for the client a successful strategy to deal with the disputes they have.”

As his days of private practice are drawing to a close, his lifelong interest in public service has set the foundation for a new career.

Curry’s interest in GOP politics has always been in place. He worked for Ronald Reagan’s 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns, and he became the Republican committeeman of the 32nd Ward after he moved into the Bucktown neighborhood in Chicago in the mid-1990s.

“That is God’s work because you are in the minority party,” he says of his ward committeeman’s position. “I was doing my part for my party in my community.”

He points out with pride that when he started, there were only 350 GOP voters in the ward. When he left the position two years ago, there were 2,000.

He moved to Barrington when he and his wife Jamie found their “dream house.” Not long after he moved in, he was encouraged to run for Cook County Circuit Court judge.

In March, he won a narrow victory in the Republican primary and with no Democratic opponent on the ballot, Curry will assuredly be sworn into office the first week of December.

“I got to the point where I didn’t see what I was doing in my law practice changing a great deal,” he says.

Curry finds two things about being a judge especially appealing. “You are in the courtroom all the time, and I like being in the courtroom. I like the dynamics of it,” Curry says.

“Also, unlike private practice, you really have an ability to have a direct impact on public life and public policy. As a judge you are deciding cases, and you are involved in the administration of justice. In my life I’ve always had a public service bent which I’ve not been able to give a lot of vent to over the last 25 years.”

His friends and colleagues believe Curry will thrive in his new role.

“He is an experienced litigator in both state and federal court with an accent on commercial litigation, so he will bring to the bench not only his intellectual curiosity but also sensitivity to the plight of the clients and the litigators,” says noted litigation communications consultant Chris Robling.

As he prepares to take a seat on the bench, Curry is now winding down his time at Polsinelli. When he has the opportunity, he and his wife pursue his interests in traveling, golf, riding his Vespa, music, Irish culture, and entertaining friends at home.

“A lot of practitioners have great frustration with judges and the system in Cook County, and I want to contribute to a system that is more litigant friendly, more efficient, and performing in a fashion where the general public feels justice has been satisfied and not disserved,” Curry says.

“I want to bring my work ethic and dedication to excellence to my work as a judge. I hope it will improve the quality of the bench in our community.”