

Meet Zelalem Bogale:

Thurgood Marshall's Story Inspired Child of Immigrants to a Career in the Law

BY MARY BACON, ESQ.

When Zelalem Bogale was eight years old, he fell in love with reading about U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. Marshall's words and life story profoundly impacted Bogale—they felt like a calling: “[w]here you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country.” And Bogale has been propelled by a commitment to justice and equality ever since.

Bogale is a first-generation American. Like his older brother, he was born in Reno to immigrant parents who fled Ethiopia during socialist upheaval. His mother worked as a medical technologist in northern Nevada hospitals and his father worked in gaming, ultimately becoming a pit boss at Circus Circus.

“Reno allowed my family to thrive,” he said. “It is part of my family’s origin story—and it will always mean a lot to me for that reason.”

Bogale grew up in Sparks and attended Washoe County public schools. His parents were intentional about his integration into American culture and his understanding of American history. At the same time, they were also deliberate about instilling Ethiopian traditions and values into their children’s daily lives. Bogale’s favorite Ethiopian tradition is the coffee ceremony—a



cultural tradition that involves brewing coffee from raw beans, and is considered a sign of respect, hospitality, and friendship.

As a boy, Bogale was extroverted and had lots of friends. He was naturally curious and loved learning. His father would encourage him to watch political debates and conventions. One summer, Bogale watched the entire multi-day convention of one of the two major political parties and wrote a report for his father analyzing the issues. Before long, he found himself immersed in politics and reading Marshall as an elementary school child. He was enchanted with Marshall’s creativity, persuasiveness, and ability to use the law to bring about an America more aligned with its founding ideals.

Bogale’s love for learning ensured school came easily to him. He enjoyed completing extra math problems at home. After struggling with a stutter for most of elementary and middle school, he became an expert at thinking of synonyms so he could find a new word if he was struggling to pronounce the word he wanted to say.

“A career in the law where I speak for a living, was not especially likely when I was young,” he said with a smile.

Bogale met his only living grandparent when he was very young. The memory of that visit was life changing. The meeting helped form his identity and shaped what he thought he could be. His grandfather was a judge in Ethiopia. Bogale had never met a Black man who was a judge—or a legal professional for that matter—and that remained the case for years even after meeting his grandfather. Spending months with his grandfather, along with his own intense interest in politics encouraged by his father, cemented Bogale’s desire

to pursue a profession of advocacy based in logic and reason. He participated in “We the People” in high school and familiarized himself with ancient Greek philosophy and America’s constitutional framework in his spare time. It paid off. His team won the state championship and traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in nationals.

After deciding to attend the University of Nevada, Reno for college, he was eager to get involved in the campus community. Bogale became founder and co-president of the then-defunct “College Democrats,” and he worked three jobs all while carrying a full load of courses. He was a server at a Mexican restaurant, a teller at Wells Fargo Bank, and a paid staffer and canvasser on various political campaigns.

Upon graduation, he traveled to Ethiopia for the first time to attend his cousin’s wedding. Determined to see as much of Ethiopia as possible, he ended up staying for seven weeks and traveled roughly 1,600 miles around the country, meeting his extended family and exploring the country.

Four years later, Bogale chose California Western School of Law for law school and excelled. He published a note on international environmental law and policy, and served as president of the Black Law Students Association. He also interned with the San Diego Volunteer Lawyer HIV/AIDS Legal Services Project, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of California, and the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California. While at the U.S. Attorney’s Office, he was captivated by the art of trial advocacy.

“I loved the theater and the creativity of it,” Bogale said. “I loved the art of persuasion.”

His initial desire to attend law school before entering politics was gone; he was sold on being a courtroom attorney.

Bogale moved back home after law school and served as a judicial law clerk for three different judges in state and federal court. One of his former bosses, Nevada Supreme Court Chief Justice Lidia Stiglich said, “Simply put: Zelalem sparkles.”

After his clerkships, he became a criminal prosecutor at the Washoe County District Attorney’s Office, taking nearly 20 felony cases to verdict in five

years (including six cases in 2016). His exceptional advocacy skills were recognized by the Washoe County District Attorney’s Office, first as “Attorney of the Month” and then as “Attorney of the Year.” His most memorable case was a double homicide involving the notorious MS-13 gang. The case resulted in sentences of life without parole and became a published opinion on an issue of first impression.

Bogale later worked on Attorney General Aaron Ford’s Transition Team in 2018 and got the chance to reignite his interest in environmental law and policy with NV Energy, and NV Energy’s future parent company, Berkshire Hathaway Energy Co. Today, he is delighted to spend his days working on environmental justice policy—aligning with the justice work he fell in love with as a boy, in school, as a prosecutor, and as a professor.

To stay involved in the community, Bogale teaches Courts and Jurisprudence in the Criminal Justice Department, and Race and Law in the Gender, Race, and Identity Program at the University of Nevada, Reno. A proud member of Nevada’s “We the People” 1999 State Championship Team, Bogale has coordinated “We the People” in northern Nevada, frequently serves as an advisor for the program and judge during competitions and serves as a member of the Center for Civic Education’s National Advisory Council. He also serves as a member of the Northern Nevada Judicial Commission, which evaluates and recommends candidates for the federal bench.

In his spare time, Bogale enjoys coaching his son’s soccer team and playing music – piano, drums, and a little guitar. If you run into him, you might ask about the time his wallet was stolen in Mexico, and he had to sell his shirt to pay for a bus ticket back home.

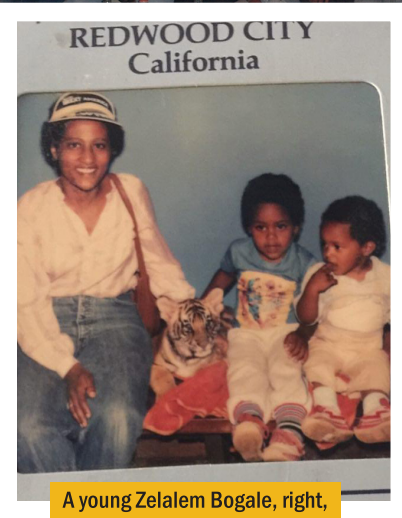
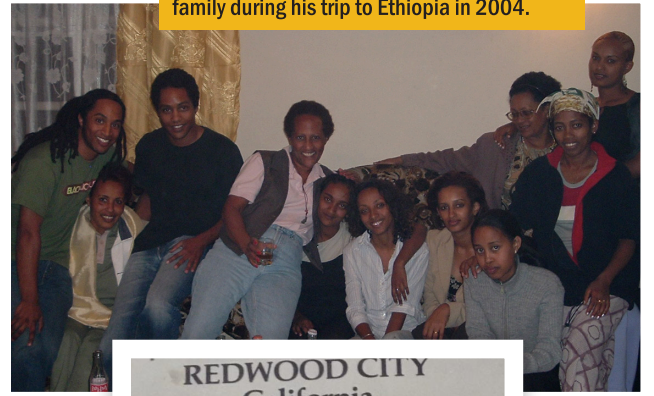


Zelalem Bogale poses with the Honorable William G. Cobb (left), the Honorable Patrick Flanagan, and Nevada Supreme Court Chief Justice Lidia Stiglich after his swearing-in as a deputy district attorney in Washoe County. Bogale has clerked with each of these judges during his career.



Zelalem Bogale serves as a prosecutor during a double homicide trial in Washoe County in October 2017.

Zelalem Bogale poses with his large extended family during his trip to Ethiopia in 2004.



A young Zelalem Bogale, right, visits Marine World with his mom and older brother.