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Lawyer with cerebral palsy has big case

Randall Howe will argue for Arizona at U.S. high court

The Arizona Republic

Randall Howe, an appellate lawyer for Arizona, is approaching the biggest moment of his career: his first appearance before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Howe expects his legal reasoning will be so airtight that the justices peppering him with questions will not see a man with cerebral palsy, a pronounced limp and a significant speech impairment.

After 17 years with the Arizona Attorney General's Office, he will argue Wednesday before the nation's highest court in a case involving the murder of a Flagstaff police officer.

Cerebral palsy damaged the parts of Howe's brain that involve his ability to control movement. He has a bad arm and a bad leg. His posture is slumped and his speech is slurred.

Howe has worked for years to improve his speech, and while a listener has to pay close attention, he is understandable.

Howe is the chief counsel of the Criminal Appeals Section of the office and oversees 19 lawyers.

He has carved a niche in appellate advocacy, work that places Howe in a courtroom where he makes arguments to judges who are questioning the validity of lower court rulings.

Living with cerebral palsy hasn't been easy.

"The big downside of having a disability, apart from the physical, is that it makes you different, and I have always harped about not being different," Howe said.

As with everything else in his life, Howe has devised a way to work around his physical limitations.

"I have to pick and choose what I say. I know judges at the Arizona Supreme Court pay attention because they know I wouldn't say it unless it really matters."

Howe wants to win his case, of course, and he doesn't want to be held up as an example and praised for overcoming a handicap.

"Having a disability does not make you any more noble than anyone else," he said. Howe cringes when he is called special. Hardworking and smart, yes, but not special. "I've been called that before, and it either consciously or unconsciously puts a distance between me and people. It makes me different." That may be what bothers Howe most of all about his condition. He wants to be known as a good person and a good lawyer. He wants to be known for his accomplishments, not for what he had to overcome.

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