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By Anthony Head

Shawn Raymond is poised to revolutionize public service in America

Shawn Raymond is on the verge of nothing less than redefining America's public sector, by co-founding the U.S. Public Service Academy in 2006. His goal for the academy? To bring pride, honor and a true sense of accomplishment and professionalism to the realm of national service.

"The idea is to create a four-year undergraduate academy modeled on the five military service academies," says Raymond, a successful litigator for Houston's Susman Godfrey. "In exchange for a free education, candidates would give five years to public service. Right now we need teachers, translators for the war on terror, police officers, border guards, social workers—the need has never been greater."

Although plans for the actual curriculum—much less a physical location—are still being completed, the U.S. Public Service Academy has already been chosen by *Time* magazine as a top initiative for transforming public service in America. To date, this burgeoning idea has attracted 93 co-sponsors of a bipartisan bill in the House of Representatives; 16 U.S. senators; and three presidential candidates. "This is a place that will build people up to be leaders on civilian matters. Because in order to be successful, you have to be a cut above the rest," Raymond says.

In addition to the massive amount of work that goes into creating a forward-thinking institution, Raymond carries a heavy legal workload. Currently that includes several pending accounting malpractice cases, employment disputes and antitrust cases. Raymond loves diving into the minutiae of each case.

"Professionally, this firm prides itself on not being afraid to go to trial. Personally, that's what you spend your time on, going through boxes and depositions," Raymond says. "It's the payoff. It's one of the most exciting elements of what I do and why I do it."

He enthusiastically recalls his first jury trial in 2003 with the firm's co-founder Steve Susman. Bringing a claim on behalf of Cavalry Investments against subsidiaries of Bank of America, the team argued that the defendants breached their contract with Cavalry to sell a portfolio of subprime automobile loans. Raymond says, "I was just a third-year associate and I remember being called over to Steve's house. He asked me, 'You want to pick the jury or make the opening statement?' I'm thinking this is perhaps the best trial lawyer in the United States, who could take this case from soup to nuts no problem, and here he is with a young associate dividing up the work."

Raymond chose to make the opening statement. "When I stood up to begin making the opening statement, Steve tugged at my coat jacket and whispered, 'Go get 'em, tiger!'"

After a six-day trial, the jury found for Cavalry on every issue, awarding more than \$30 million in damages. Texas Lawyer listed the outcome as 2003's sixth-largest Texas verdict; The National Law Journal ranked it the 36th largest verdict in the United States for the year.

Raymond speaks diplomatically, almost like a politician ("I'm just an amalgam of the people who have taught and influenced me," he says, and "I think you learn the most by doing, and that's what I appreciate about our law firm. It's allowed me to see just how good I can be at my craft"). But since he's not running for any public office, he can also say things like this: "I owe much of my discipline and success to the movie *Leprechaun 3*."

To be clear, he's not winning cases thanks to a low-budget flick about a demented green elf. He's talking about an earlier period of his life, a period that primed him for leadership and success. After graduating magna cum laude from George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, Raymond signed up for a two-year stint with Teach for America. He landed in Sunflower County, Miss., teaching special education and social studies to unruly high school students, and finding himself challenged to his limits by unresponsive students.



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While 20 to 30 percent of the student population was being tracked for special education, they didn't have a classroom or proper materials—or even a teacher—before Raymond arrived. "It was utter chaos," he says. "No case that I will ever try can come close to the gut-wrenching feeling I had every morning of those first nine months trying to survive.

"I bottomed out on Halloween night of 1994," he says. "I should explain that there were cotton fields all across the community where I was teaching. After harvesting the cotton, they pour alcohol on the fields and light them on fire. So I had a particularly bad day and I was coming home. The sun was just setting and all these fields were lit up on fire. I remember stopping the car and looking at it all and just saying, 'This is it. I have truly arrived in hell.'"

But the young teacher went home, had a suck-it-up conversation with himself, and he recalled his students talking about the low-budget horror movie *Leprechaun 3*. "I didn't even know there was a *Leprechaun 1* or *2*—but I showed up the next day with the movie. I played it 10 minutes and then stopped it. I asked them to give me 20 minutes of work and I'd give them another 10 minutes of the movie." Raymond scrapped American history that day, choosing instead to use newspapers to teach about setting sales prices, sort of a mini-economics lesson on a practical level for his students. And they responded.

Being exposed to such daily struggles in an environment dominated with different world views and much different life experiences not only toughened Raymond; he says it opened new avenues of thinking: "It would have been really easy to walk away, but I wasn't going to quit or give up. I look back and know that I learned more from my students and that community than they did from me. It was part of my own self-discovery."

One student in particular, Charles Surney, would end up capturing his time, his emotions and his energy. And talk about a different life experience—Surney had been in special education since the first grade, and he lived in a three-room shanty with a dozen other people. He had to sleep in a bed with his mother. The other kids called him "Po," a nickname meaning that Surney was so poor that he couldn't even afford the last two letters of the word.

"But he was unlike any other human being I've ever met. On the first day of class he said, 'Mr. Raymond, I want to be able to read.' And it turns out that if I asked him to move a building across the street, he wouldn't have given up," says Raymond.

Sensing exceptional potential in Surney, Raymond went to bat for him and got him placed in a camp in Wisconsin for kids with learning disabilities (Surney wowed them there), and then got him accepted (tuition-free) to an elite boarding school outside Boston. Three years later and Surney had not only started a campus Habitat for Humanity program—building homes that were much better than the one he grew up in—but he graduated as valedictorian. He went off to Mitchell College in New London, Conn., where he created his own bachelor's program in business and ended his academic career as the school's commencement speaker at graduation.

"You want to talk about heroes," says Raymond as he points out a framed copy of Surney's commencement speech that hangs in his office. In it, the student thanks his former teacher, calling him a hero, a mentor, a guardian angel. "I put this up to always remind me of one of my heroes. That kid is something else. He taught me a lot."

Surney went on to run, and eventually own part of, a brewery distributor. A few nights a week he teaches at Waterford Country School, a state-run boarding school for troubled teens.

As much as experiences like that touched him, Raymond felt teaching wasn't for him. But even after he went to the University of Texas School of Law, he never forgot Mississippi. Along with two of his Teach for America roommates, the experiences of Sunflower County were pivotal in his future.

One of those roommates, Gregg Costa, also attended UT and became editor in chief of the *Texas Law Review*; Raymond was named managing editor. "After our second year we decided to go back to the community and set up a nonprofit after-school enrichment program," says Raymond. "The way that we looked at it, the Sunflower County Freedom Project would be a continuation of the Freedom Summer of 1964. This was our generation's opportunity to continue the work of the Civil Rights era. We're now in our eighth year of elevating the level of expectation of these kids in the areas of academics, social consciousness, family and leadership."

Another of his former roommates, Chris Myers Asch, also helped launch the Freedom Project, and later co-founded the U.S. Public Service Academy with Raymond. After witnessing the dismal lack of federal and local leadership following Hurricane Katrina, Asch and Raymond introduced their academy. Raymond says 5,100 students will study many traditional college subjects while also being challenged with course work in leadership development, international affairs and service learning. Upon graduation, in return for their free education, students will give back by spending five years working in local, state and national posts in education, health care and other public service fields.

"Ever since World War II, young people have really wanted to give back and serve their country," he says.

"But [this country has] priced too many kids out of college and ultimately out of taking active leadership roles in public service. We want to attract the best and the brightest to do this. Many of our advisers, like the last three superintendents of West Point, are fully on board because they recognize that leadership matters, and our country is in desperate need of leadership on civilian matters."

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Raymond thinks it makes sense to locate the academy here in Texas. "The South has no representation from the five service academies. And given what the city of Houston did in response to Hurricane Katrina, I think there would be significant symbolic power to locate it in the Lone Star State."

Wherever it finds a home, Raymond says he's not thinking about leaving his current gig to take charge. His leadership, he feels, is best suited for legal battles. Still, he knows that the time has come for this idea.

"I'm betting that 10 years from now people will be asking how did we ever go so long without something like this."

For more information about the U.S. Public Service Academy, visit www.uspublicserviceacademy.org.

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