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Holiday Magic

Festive trees, parade,
music and 'snowflakes'
heighten Christmas
cheer for Madison

Sarah Crouch

The success of this
remarkable best selling
author and runner

Letters to Santa

A special North
Pole mailbox in
downtown
Madison

Mayor Ranae Bartlett

When it comes to life,
Madison's new mayor
knows all about timing



PEOPLE



MAYOR RANAE BARTLETT

When it comes to life, Madison's new mayor knows all about timing

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PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BERRY AND CRISTIE CLARK



With her husband, Todd, by her side, United States Magistrate Judge Herman N. Johnson, Jr. swore Bartlett into office on Nov. 3. Bartlett, who won 56% of the vote in the August election, expressed her gratitude to the crowd.

In his play “Julius Caesar,” the bard penned the phrase “timing is everything.” Newly elected Madison mayor, Ranae Bartlett, can relate to this adage.

It was timing that put Bartlett in Wal-Mart’s law department, starting a long career with America’s top big-box retailer. Taking a gap year between her senior year in college and law school to be with her father, who was battling gallbladder cancer, Bartlett took a job at the Clarksville, Arkansas, Walmart. While working at the customer service desk, she had a chance encounter with the retail giant’s founder, Sam Walton.

“Sam Walton drove up in his old pickup truck. He was the most unassuming person, wearing a cap. He came in and asked for the manager by name. It was not uncommon to see him, but I happened to be there that day,” Bartlett said. “While we were waiting on the manager to come to the front, he asked if I was one of the scholarship students at the University of the Ozarks. I said no. He then asked if I wanted to get into management with the company. I told him, no, that I really had my heart set on going to law school. And he said, ‘I have a legal department. You should apply.’”

She applied, interviewed, and began working in the Wal-Mart legal department before entering law school. After graduating from the University of Arkansas School of Law, Bartlett became the company’s in-house legal counsel. A job she held until the family moved to Madison in 2003.

It was timing once again that led Bartlett to find her husband, Todd.

Because of her father’s illness, Bartlett did not begin law school in the Fall of 1989, as scheduled, and postponed her entry until 1990. Her husband started law school in 1989. Their paths should have crossed then but didn’t.

“I started my first year in ‘90, and he is in his second year,” Bartlett said. “Then his National Guard troop became activated to fight the Persian Gulf War. He had to leave in his second year, finish the war, come back, and had to start his second year over with me.”

A year later, another coincidence in timing occurred. The two were in competition to be first in their class. They were competing in a moot-court competition. Todd was one of the teams, she on the other.





Newly sworn-in Madison City Council members with Mayor Ranae Bartlett include (left to right): Maura Wroblewski for District 1, David Bier for District 2, Billie Goodson for District 3, Michael McKay for District 4, Alice Lessmann for District 5, Erica White for District 6 and Kenneth Jackson for District 7. You can read about the new Madison City Council in the December issue of Madison Living.

“We were getting ready to argue, and the entire problem got thrown out because one of the competitors cheated, which caused a disciplinary investigation. So, we all had to start over with a brand-new problem. I lost my partner. Todd lost his partner,” Bartlett said. “It was getting close to finals, and we wanted the moot court over so we could focus on finals. I finally called Todd up and asked him to be my partner so we could win.”

The couple got engaged and has been married 32 years this month.

Bartlett found her way to Huntsville through a friend connected to Judge Lynwood Smith, Jr. Smith helped Todd make a connection with Intergraph for a position, so the couple headed to Huntsville to find a home.

Once again, timing and circumstances led the Bartlett family to set up residence in Madison.

“We didn’t find anything on our first trip. We looked in Huntsville and Madison. I could not get away for a second trip, but Todd could. So, he actually gets all the credit for us being in Madison,” Ranae said. “He had some help from realtor, Betty Hughes, who to this day is one of our dearest friends. She and Todd found the house. He sent me photos, and we bought it. We have been in the same house since 2003.”

When it came to applying for the Madison City School Board, timing, played a role again. After working as Judge Smith’s career clerk for about six years, Bartlett decided to be a stay-at-home mom. She began volunteering at her son’s school, serving as the PTA’s book fair chair at Rainbow Elementary and starting a chess club. Her participation in the schools led her to apply for the Madison City School Board.

“I wasn’t selected. That was a great lesson. Timing is everything,” Bartlett said. “And the time I first applied and was not selected was not my time. And as a result of not being selected, I started volunteering more on committees for the school system, which made me a much better school board member by the time I was selected.”

With her second term on the school board ending and her son graduating and heading to college, Bartlett threw her hat in the ring for a seat on the City Council in 2020.

“The biggest reason and motivator were that after experiencing the growth we were having in our school system, I thought that we needed to have a more responsible approach to growth in the city of Madison,” Bartlett said. “I just wanted to have a voice in that, and

I realized that a lot of the important decisions that impact education at the city council level, in terms of how they are funded and how school board members are selected. That was a way for me to continue to support public education through a city council seat and also help our city manage growth.”

In March 2024, Bartlett became the executive director of the U.S. Chess Federation, traveling the world to promote and support the game of chess. Timing, which has always been by her side, now came calling at an inopportune time. Some people in Madison called to encourage her to run for mayor.

“I had taken this new job, and so initially I was quite hesitant about running. And then I leaned more towards not running because of my commitment to this different profession and career,” Bartlett said. “But then people were not taking no for an answer. People kept encouraging me. There were a lot of coffee dates, lunch dates, and people saying that I needed to do this.”

Now that Ranae has her time in the mayor’s chair, she can show her love for Madison in a new way, as well as continue doing the things that make the city a special place. One of those special events is to continue the Halloween chess tournament on the football field at Madison Stadium.

“We held the first one during the pandemic because we needed to distance, and we have hosted it every year since. I just love hosting the event. It is my favorite event of the entire year,” Bartlett said. “I’m still a chess volunteer. Mill Creek Elementary has asked me to help coach a K-1 class that begins in January. The class will be offered at 7 a.m., so I’m going to start my day with that in January.”

As for the governing side of the mayor’s office, Bartlett says the first year will be aggressive. In talking with her predecessors, she understands that four years go by fast, so it is essential for any mayor to hit the ground running early.

“We are going to come out in our first month having some significant work sessions and meetings where significant action is taken,” Bartlett said. “Luckily, we have an energetic council that is ready to get some things done.”

This significant action includes items to support the public school system, expand commercial and industrial development, and create advisory councils to help plan the vision for her administration and continue to accomplish it. Bartlett does not just want to seek the advice of those in City Hall when making plans for the city; she wants to connect with the citizens of Madison.

“I want to be present in Madison, and I want people to see their mayor everywhere, not just at ribbon cuttings, but just having coffee in a restaurant, talk-



Mayor Ranae Bartlett hit the ground running leading up to being sworn-in, meeting with area and regional leaders like U.S. Representative Dale Strong, Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle and Madison County Chairman Mac McCutcheon (not pictured).





ing to people, hearing from people, being accessible. I'm really looking forward to connecting with people and seeking advice," Bartlett said. "There are a lot of smart people who have decided to live in Madison. They may work in different places, but they decide to live here, and I want to draw upon the expertise and experience of those wise people."

Although her daily duties as Mayor will always be a part of her daily life, Bartlett will take the time to enjoy the things she holds dear—her husband and son, Michael, college football (she is known to yell a Roll Tide in public), chess, reading, and her dog, Millie.

"I was not looking initially to have a dog. It was the Fourth of July weekend, and Millie was surrendered to Friends of Rescue. I was to take her into my home to get her out of the shelter when the fireworks were going to go on, and to help her recover from being spayed," Bartlett said. "I became a foster failure. I could not let her go. We adopted her. So, every bit of free time when I'm at home, I love to hang out with her."

Bartlett says Madison has the quality of life every family would want. She cites downtown Madison as

an area with gems she frequents.

"Right now, I love Zanotta's as my comfort food place. It is charming, the service is impeccable, and it's just good, comforting Italian food. You can go around the corner for drinks at the Vine and Oak afterwards," Bartlett said. "I just love the whole downtown atmosphere. We've seen so many significant developments in downtown. We will continue to look for growth in that area."

Whether she is spending time downtown for fun or in City Hall, one thing is sure: timing is again playing a role in Bartlett's life. It's time for her to take the helm of the Mayor's office."

"I want to keep Madison special. There's a small-town feel to Madison that we want to preserve," Bartlett said. "It's a safe city. It's a place with an outstanding public education system, where every school in the entire city is an A school—and you can't say that about most places. Madison is a place where our churches and our community come together to meet needs, and that sense of the community is not going to change even as we add more people. There will just be more people who get to experience the magic of Madison."

