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Breakfast With Dean Kagan: A Student Journalist's Eye-Opener

By [JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ](#)

When I was 19 and a rookie student reporter, I asked out [Elena Kagan](#). Harvard deans don't usually respond to e-mails from overzealous freshmen looking for scoops, but she did, and within seven minutes we had a date: breakfast, the Charles Hotel, 8:30 a.m.

I arrived at the Charles that morning, a Sunday in 2005, and was immediately taken aback by the dean's informality. She showed up in jeans. She nagged me about getting more sleep. She bragged about her refusal to carry a cellphone ("My one defense against the world," she said).

At our dozen or so meetings over the next three years, we talked about everything from the disintegrating presidency of [Lawrence H. Summers](#) to the poker bashes she threw at her home for professors.

I walked away each time wondering why the dean of Harvard Law School was breaking bread with a lowly beat reporter for The Harvard Crimson. Was she nostalgic about her days as a student journalist? (She was a top editor at The Daily Princetonian as an undergraduate.) Or was it a strategic choice? There was no time, after all, to jot down each bit of gossip between bites of granola and hash browns. And the dean did not appreciate tape recorders at the breakfast table.

Whatever her motives, it was clear she was protective of her image as Harvard's dream dean. While many administrators ignored the student paper, Dean Kagan was a scrupulous reader,

dashing off e-mail messages — sometimes flattering, sometimes scornful — about the tiniest of stories involving the law school.

It was no secret that Ms. Kagan had lofty aspirations. She filled her calendar — nights, weekends, holidays — with work-related social events. “This is my family,” she once said of the law school.

When Justices [Stephen Breyer](#) and [Antonin Scalia](#) visited campus in 2005, I watched Dean Kagan, a scholar of administrative law, ask whether a “prime criterion” for joining the court was teaching law.

“Being administrative law professors, yes,” Justice Breyer said, eliciting laughter from the lecture hall.

Her admiration for [Barack Obama](#) was also well known. When he visited Harvard in 2005 as a senator from Illinois, she told alumni that he was a “rock star” and that her “fondest wish” had once been to keep him in academia. She winced when Mr. Summers mangled Mr. Obama’s name, introducing him as “BARE-ack.”

As the senator addressed the crowd, I whispered to her, “Could you still get him as a professor?”

“He’s too good for us,” she said. “He’s going to change the world.”

As Harvard searched for a new president in 2006, our breakfasts sometimes resembled one-on-one coaching sessions. Dean Kagan seemed interested in the lives of undergraduates, one of her few blind spots, quizzing me on everything from dorm life to the quality of advising.

When she was not selected for the presidency, she expressed disappointment. “Of course you

want to win," she later told me.

But as was her fortune, it was not long before another coveted position came along. With a Democrat likely to reclaim the White House in 2008, her name was splashed across front pages as a possible nominee to the [Supreme Court](#).

Back at the Charles, over an egg-white omelet, whole-wheat toast and coffee with skim milk, she seemed to delight in the attention. But she would never admit it.

"There's still a lot to do at Harvard," she said. "Why would I want to leave?"

Javier C. Hernandez was a reporter for The Harvard Crimson from 2004 to 2008. He now covers City Hall for The Times.