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Alumni Profile

3B goes bigtime

Maybe it's partly because Ted Ayres played third base — aka the hot corner — growing up in Hamilton, Mo., but he was ready and willing to field rapid-fire questions before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1981. He didn't get there overnight.

But almost.

Ayres, JD '72, started practicing higher education law at the University of Missouri in 1976. "Back then, people used to ask why a university needs its own lawyers. They don't ask that any more," Ayres says. Before long, a case the young Ayres had handled from the beginning reached the high court. In *Widmar v. Vincent*, the University of Missouri–Kansas City declared its facilities off limits to student groups for religious worship services. Ayres says the prohibition wasn't anti-religious, it was just a public institution trying to keep clear the line between church and state. Thomas Jefferson would have approved, he says, but a student group sued.

"We arrived in Washington to observe the court a day before our case came up, just to get a flavor of the proceedings," Ayres says. "By coincidence it was Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's first day on the bench." That much was thrilling, but the next day? "Extremely intimidating." In only 30 minutes, lawyers for both sides had to present arguments and answer justices' questions.

"The adrenaline was flying," Ayres says. "Justice Warren Burger asked, 'Isn't it true that your university permits meetings of gay student groups?' I said, 'Yes we do, but there is no direct first amendment issue related to that. This case involves the separation of church and state, which is a stronger, more specific prohibition.'" With that sleight-of-hand, Ayres' reply turned an aggressive question back into a selling point for his case. "I was overprepared. It went by in






Ted Ayres, JD '72, argued a case before the Supreme Court of the United States.

the blink of an eye.”

The university lost its case, but it didn't do Ayres' any professional harm. His distinguished 24-year career in higher education law and administration includes service at the University of Colorado, Kansas Board of Regents and now Wichita State University, where he is vice president and general counsel.

Ayres still loves America's pastime. Whenever he can, the lifelong St. Louis Cardinals fan treks to the Gateway City and takes in a game, just as he did when he was a boy tending the hot corner. — *Dale Smith*

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