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U.S. Attorney Todd Graves oversaw ever-growing criminal docket

'Prosecutor's prosecutor' to move on after 4½ years

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MIKE RANSELL/The Kansas City Star

"I want to get involved in (working on) the presidential race," U.S. Attorney Todd Graves said Thursday.



DAVID EULITT/The Kansas City Star

At a courthouse meeting Thursday, Todd Graves told staffers he hoped to be remembered as someone who had served

the office well.

Todd Graves will announce his resignation as U.S. attorney for the Western District of Missouri at a news conference this morning.

In an interview with *The Kansas City Star* this week, Graves, 40, said he planned to return to the private practice of law and get more involved in politics, although he said he had not yet decided whether he would seek elective office in the near future.

"I want to get involved in (working on) the presidential race," Graves said. "It's not a motivating factor (for resigning), but it's something I'm looking forward to."

Graves notified his staff at a courthouse meeting about 4:20 p.m. Thursday. He told the staffers that his time to go had come and that he hoped he would be remembered as someone who had served the office well.

"Yes, you have," piped up Gene Harrison, a career prosecutor who has served under numerous U.S. attorneys. "Is there anything we can do to change your mind? Give two years notice?"

Graves' resignation takes effect March 24. He said the U.S. Justice Department had not appointed an interim replacement, who often is chosen from among the sitting U.S. attorney's chief deputies. President Bush will nominate a permanent replacement after consulting with Republican Sens. Kit Bond and Jim Talent.

Since becoming U.S. attorney in September 2001, Graves has overseen an expansion of his office and an ever-growing criminal docket in Western Missouri. Death penalty cases became a more regular feature of the federal docket, illegal-firearms prosecutions increased significantly, and child abuse and child pornography cases — which Graves declared his top local priority immediately after taking office — became a courthouse staple.

As the former Platte County prosecutor, Graves also was comfortable arguing cases in the courtroom. In 2003 he led the successful death penalty prosecution of Wesley Purkey for the kidnapping and murder of 16-year-old Jennifer Long in 1998.

Graves said his one regret in leaving is no longer being able to participate in the prosecution of Lisa Montgomery, charged in the December 2004 death of Bobbie Jo Stinnett and the kidnapping of her unborn daughter.

Originally scheduled for an April trial, the case recently was continued until October. Graves noted that the crime in Skidmore occurred about 20 miles from where he grew up near Tarkio.

"I regret that deeply," Graves said. "That's an important case. It touches on a lot of personal things for me."

Though cases often are brought to the U.S. attorney's office by federal law enforcement agencies, Graves also nurtured relationships with local officials and police, who now regularly work on federal cases within their jurisdictions.

Kansas City Police Chief Jim Corwin said Graves had been a partner to the department going back to his days in the Platte County prosecutor's office.

"His exceptional professionalism will be missed by all of us in law enforcement," Corwin said Thursday. "I wish him continued success in his future endeavors."

Jackson County Prosecutor Mike Sanders, a Democrat, said Graves should be the model for whoever is nominated to replace him.

"He established himself as a prosecutor's prosecutor," Sanders said. "The level of cooperation between local law enforcement and the U.S. attorney's office has never been higher. For all those reasons, I'm fairly saddened that someone who has been as successful as he has is moving on."

Graves' top priorities — guns, drugs and child sex cases — mirrored those of the Bush administration. But he occasionally irritated some federal judges, who grouched privately that he had turned the federal venue into a "police court" by bringing cases that would more properly be handled by state judges.

White-collar prosecutions remained steady during Graves' time in office, even as the FBI diverted resources to terrorism. Prosecutors pursued big-dollar cases involving phantom cattle and automobiles, telephone fraud, counterfeit Lipitor and mortgage fraud that depressed home values in the urban core.

Graves said his office recently added three financial analysts who would help boost the number of white-collar cases.

And though his record against corrupt public figures has not been as prominent as that of his predecessor — who successfully brought down the speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives and three members of the Kansas City Council — Graves had some success.

He brought charges against Jackson County lobbyist Bill Waris, a school superintendent who looted his district's coffers, and three Missouri judges, including Kansas City Municipal Judge Deborah Neal, who admitted taking loans from lawyers.

Of that lot, the prosecution of Waris for lying to FBI agents drew the widest attention from the Kansas City political establishment.

Though for a time it appeared that Graves eventually would move against Jackson County Executive Katheryn Shields for her handling of county contracts, that probe withered after Waris' guilty plea in the summer. The lack of charges prompted some grumbling that the investigation appeared "political," and in January, Shields said in a speech that she had been vindicated and done nothing wrong.

Graves declined to discuss the probe in detail, other than to say that the prosecution of Waris was proper because of statements he had made to the grand jury and investigators.

Graves, the brother of U.S. Representative Sam Graves, said he probably would remain in the Kansas City area. He lives on a 210-acre farm north of Kansas City that has been in his family since 1867.

Graves' tenure

Criminal prosecutions have increased 34 percent since Todd Graves' first year as U.S. attorney. Some highlights:

- **Prosecutions** for illegal firearms possession increased 54 percent, to 341 cases last year from 222 in fiscal 2002.
- **Child pornography** and abuse cases, Graves' top local priority, grew to 47 cases from 13.
- **The federal death penalty** docket expanded, including capital cases against Wes Purkey, Lisa Montgomery and John E. Robinson.
- **Notable white-collar cases** included the George Young/Kathleen McConnell "phantom cattle" case, the "Miracle Car" scam, the Lipitor drug counterfeiting case and a crackdown on mortgage fraud.
- **Public corruption actions** included convictions of Jackson County lobbyist Bill Waris for lying to FBI agents, Kansas City Municipal Judge Deborah Neal for fraud and Pattonsburg school superintendent Ronnie DeShon for embezzling.

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