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Doug Robinson: Sean Reyes — Out of the 'hood, into the AG's office

By Doug Robinson , Deseret News
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Sean Reyes, the 21st attorney general of Utah, relaxes at home with his wife, Saysha, and their six children on Thursday, Dec. 31, 2015. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)

I tried to interview Sean Reyes, the attorney general and world-class talker, but he took over somewhere between “hello” and “have a seat,” and then hijacked the whole thing. I might have actually asked a question or two in there somewhere, but he ran with it otherwise, moving seamlessly from one subject to the next, with or without transitions or oxygen. After calling timeout a few times and trying to redirect the flow of the monologue, I surrendered. I sat back and enjoyed the show, along with a couple of his staffers.

If you were expecting the state’s top lawman to be taciturn and dour, you’re in for a surprise. He’s passionate, humorous, chummy, outgoing and a serious crime fighter, too. But if Reyes ever gives up politics and law, he could go into show business, like his father; he could host a TV talk show, with himself as his nightly guest. He can sing, dance, rap and yap and never come up for air. The only thing he can’t do is sleep, and if you spend any time with him this will come as no surprise. So here’s Sean Reyes’ story, somewhat as he told it to me on a snowy afternoon in his office at the state Capitol, only more orderly. Where do we start? His United Nations ancestry? His immigrant father? His L.A. years as a gold-chain-wearing DJ known as Pineapple Crush? His service as a Mormon bishop or an undercover sting operative? We’ll start here:

SALT LAKE CITY — As many in political circles know, Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes debuted his talents a year ago when the Republican National Committee named him one of the party’s four rising stars. He flew to San Diego to accept the award and was the first in line among the honorees to be interviewed by national political reporter Mark Halperin. That was a mistake. Reyes was such a tough act to follow, that no one followed.

Attempting to refute the boring reputation of Republicans, Halperin asked Reyes, a man who grew up in the 'hood, if he could rap. Reyes took it from there. *We’re the partners of rhyme, the legion of doom / when we’re on stage, sucka, emcees make room for us ... cause*



they know we're the best, I'm the Pineapple Crush, she's the emcee Kid Fresh / So when we're on the mike, we never lose a fight / in the light of day or the still of night. ..." Egged on, he followed that with a Maori war dance and an Elvis impression in which he sang "Love Me Tender."

Sean Reyes, the 21st attorney general of Utah, relaxes at home on Thursday, Dec. 31, 2015. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)



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Halperin didn't bother with the other three interviews, and Reyes' performance became an Internet hit.

At 44, Reyes lacks the guardedness and cynicism that might infect most men who have spent two decades witnessing the worst in human behavior. There are days when he leaves the office with tears in his eyes because of the "destruction, carnage and dysfunction" he sees, but he's just optimistic enough to believe his work is making a difference.

After completing research for a profile, a reporter once complained to Reyes that his story would be imbalanced because nobody would say anything bad about him. It was just too *positive*. But what other conclusion was there when the story features a guy who, shortly after talking the AG job, interviewed everyone connected to his office, including the astounded janitors. *What do you do? How do you feel about working here? You're part of the team and no one is more important here than anyone else.*

This is what kind of guy the extroverted, people-loving Reyes is: When he sees groups of people walking around the Capitol — especially youths — he introduces himself and takes them on a tour. He has studied the tour guidebook so he can be more knowledgeable about the building. Many mistake him for an official tour guide.

"That's one of my favorite things to do," he says. "I love it.

Reyes likes to be moving anyway. He admits he has a difficult time "sitting still," and throughout this interview he was the only one in the room — *his* office — who didn't sit; for more than two hours, he worked the room like a man on stage for his audience of three. As he talked, he eagerly explained the odd collection of curios that fill the shelves, many of them representing his mixed ethnic heritage — his late mother was half Hawaiian and half Japanese, his father half Filipino and half Spanish.



Sean Reyes, the 21st attorney general of Utah, relaxes at home on Thursday, Dec. 31, 2015. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)

"I'm Hispanic-Polynesian," says Reyes. "I get to check a lot of boxes. So did my employers."



Sean Reyes, the 21st attorney general of Utah, relaxes at home on Thursday, Dec. 31, 2015. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)

There is a Japanese Katana sword, Hawaiian boat paddles lined with shark teeth, a Hawaiian war club, traditional Filipino weapons, Spanish jewelry. There are also action figures from Marvel Comics (a childhood comic reader, he once addressed Comic Con), family photos, boxing gloves (he was a boxer in his youth), a jujitsu belt (he studied martial arts in college) and, hmmm, a machine gun in the corner. A *real* machine gun, whose bullets are tucked away in an office safe.

“We’ve made this a secure place, but if we ever had to protect ourselves, and if the Hawaiian and Filipino weapons aren’t sufficient, then I’ve got real firepower,” he says. He’s laughing, but he’s serious.

Reyes, the first ethnic minority in Utah history to hold a statewide office, never considered a political career for himself until 2010, when then-AG Mark Shurtleff began to be dogged by questions of impropriety. Reyes had been a partner in Utah’s biggest law firm, Parsons, Behle and Latimer, for 14 years and then earned his business chops as general counsel for a tech company called eTagz. By then he was grumbling about what was happening in the AG’s office.



Sean Reyes, the 21st attorney general of Utah, relaxes at home with his wife, Saysha, and their six children on Thursday, Dec. 31, 2015. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)

“You’re complaining about what’s going on, so do something about it and we’ll support you,” his wife, Saysha, told him. Urged, as well, by other political observers hoping to stop Shurtleff’s hand-picked successor from winning the Republican nomination in 2012, Reyes ran against John Swallow in the primary and lost big. But in December 2013, Swallow resigned amid more charges of corruption, exactly as some had feared. Gov. Gary Herbert appointed Reyes as Swallow’s replacement, and since then he has had to spend almost as much time trying to remain in office as he has fighting crime. Under Utah law, because he was appointed to fill a vacated office, Reyes had to run again in the non-election year of 2014, and this time he won. In 2016 he will be seeking the job for the fourth time in five years.

It has been an eventful time in office. In some ways, Reyes’ timing couldn’t have been worse — or better, depending on your point of view. After taking office he immediately found himself squarely in the middle of some of the most high-profile, controversial cases in history: immigration, same-sex marriage, polygamy. It didn’t always sit well with him.

“We defend the laws, whether we agree with them or not,” he says. “That’s our job.



Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes slaps hands with his son as he declares victory in the Attorney General race on election night in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2014. (Deseret News)

But we have tried to fight back against federal government because this particular administration has expanded the reach of executive power and it seems more and more that federal government is telling us how to educate our kids, run our businesses, manage our lands. We've joined a lot of other states in lawsuits to push back on that encroachment."

He notes that his office has thwarted terrorists in Utah, partnered with other agencies to remove drugs from the street — including the largest heroin and spice busts in state history — and put a dent in white-

collar crime. "We have been kicking butt on the white-collar crime," he says excitedly. "It is one of my highest priorities. We lose millions and millions of dollars to white-collar crime. It's a big problem in Utah because people in the LDS community trust one another."

Reyes delights in getting his hands a little dirty on the front lines with his investigators. He has staked out identity fraud mills and massage parlors, which are frequently covers for prostitution and sex trafficking, all under the control of organized crime.

"I love being out with my guys," he says. "It helps me understand what they're doing and to be a better advocate for them. It was eye opening to see all these johns dressed in suits and ties, coming from downtown businesses to solicit sex from women we understood were abducted and forced into these trafficking rings. We've staked out a number of massage parlors with hidden cameras and Inspector Gadget stuff, as well as personal surveillance. We drive by and see what licenses are coming up. We follow where they take the women. The investigations take a long time."



Utah Governor Gary R. Herbert and Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes talk Monday, Oct. 6, 2014, to the media in the Rampton room of the Capitol after the Supreme Court refused to hear appeals on same-sex marriages, making them legal. (Scott G Winterton, Deseret News)

Reyes generated considerable publicity for his role in a covert operation executed in fall 2014 by Operation Underground Railroad that took down a sex trafficking ring in Cartagena, Colombia. The "railroad" is a collection of former CIA agents and special ops soldiers, many of them Mormons, who are dedicated to freeing girls from sex slavery worldwide. Reyes posed as a bodyguard and translator for a man posing as a wealthy American businessman seeking sex with young girls at a sex party. He also offered to invest \$1 million in the business if the ring brought all of its girls to the party, not just a handful, as would normally be the case. The result was a three-city sting operation that resulted in numerous arrests and freedom for 127 girls — some as young as 10 — from a sex slavery business whose biggest clients are Americans and Canadians. The girls broke out in song when they realized they were free.



Sean Reyes takes the oath of office as Utah's Attorney General in the Rotunda of the state capitol on Monday, Dec. 30, 2013. Reyes replaces John Swallow, who resigned back in November. (Deseret News)

“I was absolutely disgusted,” says Reyes. “They brought out two little girls for us. They had been drugged — all the kids are drugged before these sex parties — and offered as a gift to us. It broke my heart. I thought of my own kids. It was hard to keep it together. The hardest part was not killing the traffickers on the spot. I wanted to wring their necks. What infuriates me is that my countrymen create the demand.”

According to Reyes, the sting was actually prompted by Colombian drug cartels who contacted the Colombian government about the sex slavery businesses. The government in turn contacted Operation Underground Railroad, bypassing the red tape of dealing with American government agencies.

Says Reyes, “The cartels basically said: ‘We hate these guys. We sell our drugs, but we don’t hurt women and children. You do something about it or we’ll do something about it, and you might not like how we handle it.’ ”

The sting operation put the sex-trade businesses in Cartagena out of business, at least so far, and it’s for victories like this that Reyes allows himself this brief reverie: “I love this job because you get to serve everyday and make a real difference protecting people and giving a voice to those who feel like they don’t have one. It’s gratifying putting bad guys away. I’m the son of an immigrant who came here to flee tyranny. I’m thrilled to serve here every day.”



Utah's Attorney General Sean Reyes along with Darth Vader of the Alpine Garrison greets kids as Operation Teddy Bear holds the last of their “Bear Parties” Monday, June 16, 2014, for the children of the last unit sent to Afghanistan from Utah, in the Utah State Capitol. (Scott G Winterton, Deseret News)

His father was Norberto Buddy Reyes, a colorful and multitalented man who, by age 17, was a line producer for MGM studios and headlined his own band (everyone thought he sounded like Elvis). He toured with Bob Hope, which led to his own radio and TV shows in the Philippines. He also was a painter of some note. According to Reyes, his father was commissioned by Pope Paul VI to paint his portrait, which was displayed in the Vatican.

The heady days of Buddy’s youth ended when Ferdinand Marcos rose to power. Eventually, he would rule the country under martial law for nearly a decade and rob the country of billions of dollars. Buddy spoke out against Marcos and, according to Reyes, he was threatened at gunpoint but continued to campaign against the leader. He was finally convinced to emigrate



Sean Reyes kisses his wife Saysha after taking the oath of office as Utah's Attorney General in the Rotunda of the state capitol on Monday, Dec. 30, 2013. Reyes replaced John Swallow, who resigned. (Deseret News)

to the U.S. in 1967 for his own safety.

“He had it made in the Philippines,” says Reyes. “He gave up everything and came here with nothing.”

Buddy struggled for years to find steady work, but few in the movie business wanted to hire a Filipino. He managed a meager living by painting portraits and making indie movies before there was such a thing.

“Sometimes he was paid in apples and dog food,” says Reyes. “He ate dog food. He thought it was better nutritionally than some other human food. He always said, if life gets tough, there's dog food.”

Eventually, Buddy's reputation earned him commissions to paint portraits for Gene Autry, John Wayne and, later, Magic Johnson and the Apollo 11 crew, a painting that was sent to the Smithsonian Institute. A year after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, he entered a portrait of King in an MLK art contest and won.

Buddy married Annette shortly after they met in 1969. She had graduated from BYU and taken a job teaching school in a tough part of L.A. For nine years they raised their three children — Sean, Noreen and Kyle — on the border of Westchester and Inglewood near the Los Angeles Forum. It was a neighborhood of minorities, and the Reyeses, who comprised four ethnicities all by themselves, fit right in.

“We didn't live in the worst ghetto, but we were on the poorer side of the tracks,” says Sean Reyes, whose family eventually moved to the San Fernando Valley area where neighborhoods were a little improved. Scraping by largely on Annette's teaching salary, they were frugal. Annette reused gift wrap and forbade her family from throwing away zip-lock bags.



Governor Gary Herbert gives his remarks before Sean Reyes takes the oath of office as Utah's Attorney General in the Rotunda of the state capitol on Monday, Dec. 30, 2013. Reyes replaced John Swallow, who resigned. (Deseret News)



“We had three cars the entire time I was growing up,” Reyes recalls. “They had 300,000 miles on them. They all caught on fire.”

To save money, Reyes refused to spend the dollar he was given for lunch each day and instead ate whatever his classmates would throw his way — *hey, you want that sandwich?* — which is why they named him Biggest Class Mooch. Before dates, Reyes passed through the cologne aisles of Nordstrom to douse himself with samples.

At left; Saysha, wife of Sean Reyes, watches as her husband speaks to the crowd before taking the oath of office as Utah's Attorney General in the Rotunda of the state capitol on Monday, Dec. 30, 2013. Reyes replaced John Swallow, who resigned. (Deseret News)

The family spent three summers living on Indian reservations to provide Buddy with Native American subjects for his

art. When the kids were older, they were sent to Hawaii to work on their grandparents' farm, slopping hogs, weeding, planting and harvesting taro.

Despite the financial challenges, the Reyes family had a harmonious home life that was built around God, family and education. After dinner or family parties, the guitars came out and everyone sang. Buddy read books to kids or made up his own stories each night before bed. The kids were expected to address adults as "ma'am," "mister," "uncle," "sir" and so forth. "It was very traditional and no one raised his voice," recalls Reyes. The kids were expected to earn good grades and aspire for something more. Sean was still in grade school when his father read motivational books to him — "How to Win Friends and Influence People," "The Greatest Salesman in the World," etc.

"Dad's point was that you have to understand people and how to relate to them," says Reyes. "He read these books to us or talked about them at night. He also wanted me to be a Renaissance man."

The family banked its future on education, and it paid off for the three children. Noreen graduated from BYU and became a marketing executive. Kyle earned a Ph.D. and became a professor and assistant to the president at Utah Valley University.

Sean participated in a gifted program in L.A. — "They put all the uber nerds together," he says — and as a ninth-grader he was offered a full scholarship to Phillips Academy, a prestigious boarding school in Andover, Massachusetts. "My mom said no one else is raising my kid," says Reyes. "The neighbors thought she was crazy." Sean pulled straight A's every semester until law school, except for a single A-minus, which cost him his 4.0. "Mom grounded me when I got an A minus in AP calculus," he says, laughing and noting that his weighted GPA was 4.3. He had to share the title of valedictorian — "Still bothers me," he grumbles. He was a student body officer, played three sports, captained the basketball and volleyball teams, and was named by his classmates as smartest, most athletic, and best dancer.

"I was an athlete-nerd-rapper," says Reyes.

In those days, Reyes wore gold chains featuring a Mercedes emblem and adopted the persona of a rapper. One day his mother placed him in front of a mirror and said, "Look in the mirror; you're not black. You think you are."

He emceed and DJ'd parties to earn money. Some of the parties got so wild that he called the police himself. "At 2 a.m. the knives came out," he says. "There was blood on my speakers. I'd call 911. Helicopters are coming in. Everyone is scattering. I had cousins and friends who had their share of trouble, but I never got into trouble. I knew the drug, rap and gang culture, but they all respected me. I'd go to dances and they'd say, 'Hey, it's the Mormon kid.' They called me 'Pineapple Crush.'"

He matriculated to BYU and walked on to the volleyball team. "My career lasted a couple of weeks," he says. "I was there long enough to get practice gear. I had some hops in those days. That was about 40 pounds ago." In Provo, he supported himself as a cook and entertainer, performing Hawaiian songs and dances at luaus. Eventually he sold his sound equipment to help fund a church mission in the southside of Chicago.

He graduated summa cum laude from BYU in 1994 and took a law degree from Cal-Berkeley in 1997. He was hired by Parsons, Behle & Latimer, and quickly established himself as a talented newcomer. He was selected as the first recipient of the National Outstanding Young Lawyer Award.

Reyes' ethnicity has served to make him more visible and recognizable in his political career — sort of. He has been greeted by passers-by as Senator Rubio, the Florida senator. The second time it happened at an airport, Reyes replied, "Sorry, I'm not Senator Rubio," which prompted a third man

to say, “I could’ve told you that. He’s Senator Cruz.”

Reyes works 70-80 hours a week and sleeps only four hours a night.

He works in his home office from 11 to 3 a.m. with SportsCenter on in the background. It is his quiet time to catch up on emails, make sense of the day’s events and plan for tomorrow and another track meet of meetings and appointments. A habitual list maker, he makes notes to himself throughout the day of follow-up items, which are transferred to his phone, which are transferred to a spreadsheet, which ranks items in order of importance.

Before he settles into his home office, he and Saysha read to their kids and play music — Saysha sings and the children play piano, violin and ukulele. “I love kids,” says Reyes. “That’s why I have six of them. I’d like to have 12, but you have to be reasonable.”

Reyes, who served five years as a Mormon bishop in Salt Lake City early in his law career, describes a home life that is similar to that of his childhood, built around God, family and education. He calls his marriage to Saysha (ne: Fawson), a native Utahn, “the greatest thing I’ve done. She made me work for it.” He met her before she departed on a church mission in Romania. He wrote to her every week throughout her 18-month mission — letters, Shakespearian sonnets, Spencerian sonnets, poetry for her. “I was dying to see her again,” he says. “She and my kids are my life.”

Reyes says he has no plans beyond another term as AG, although he notes that the Republican National Committee has told him he would be a good candidate to become a senator, governor or even vice president. “If I return to the private sector, I’ll be thrilled,” he says. “Or if I have a chance to serve in another (elected) capacity and then go to the private sector after that, I’d be thrilled, too. But I don’t have a plan.” He pauses for a moment and says, “I’m a kid in a candy store.”

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