

October 2002

A Tribute to Judges
by **Tod Aronovitz**

Page 6

Judges, all too often, are misunderstood. More times than not they toil in solitude, silently wrestle with difficult decisions, quietly seek truth and fairness in their courtrooms, and receive no fanfare.

In 1976, U.S. Senators Lawton Chiles and Robert Stone recommended Sidney Aronovitz to President Gerald Ford to become a United States District Court Judge for the Southern District of Florida. My father was a Key West native, a highly regarded local Miami general corporate practitioner, and an active community leader. It took President Ford two long years to make the appointment. My father made President Ford, the U.S. Senate, his family, and his community proud by his dedication to judging.

He was a compassionate man, a legal scholar, and was fair to everyone who entered his courtroom—attorney, litigant, witness, or a person being sentenced. He truly loved being a judge, including the challenges, the demands, and the results achieved in completing a task well. Most judges exhibit the same qualities and the same judicial goals.

During his 22 years on the bench, he brought home a stuffed briefcase six days a week and would labor over complex cases and difficult criminal sentencing issues. He would only speak of the outstanding, well-prepared, articulate attorneys who came before him. The poorly prepared lawyers were never the subject of his conversations. His pride in his judicial colleagues was noteworthy. I see in the eyes of Florida's judges the same pride.

Four-month multi-defendant criminal trials with a sequestered jury were grueling, especially when a literal mountain of heavily footnoted briefs from his other pending cases awaited his attention. Receiving U.S. Marshal Service protection 24 hours a day—and even moving from Miami to North Carolina once for safety reasons—was a part of his job.

I asked his dear friend and “bookend” on the Southern District bench, always-admired Senior U.S. District Court Judge William Hoever: “What does being a judge mean to you?” He responded, “I love the law and all of the collateral requirements that go with it Being a judge is hard work, long hours, and attention to the rights of the parties. It involves cases in which we have to make difficult decisions, often in situations where you find it difficult, but necessary, to rule. All in all, however, I go home satisfied with my effort to seek the truth.”

I then wanted to know of Judge Hoever: “What is the biggest misperception people

have about being a judge?" He said, "The average citizen thinks that we get cases assigned and then we go off to try cases before a jury, and that is the end of it. The citizen who serves as a juror comes to realize what work there is in connection with the case."

When my father was in failing health, I sat by his side while he was being admitted in a Miami hospital emergency room. Behind the admissions clerk we saw a news bulletin on CNN advising that Panamanian General Manuel Noriega was being transported to Miami to stand trial before Judge William Hoeveler. With difficulty breathing, he turned to me and said, "Bill will do a great job on that case."

The outgoing president of the Florida Council of County Court Judges and newly appointed Palm Beach Circuit Court Judge Jeffrey J. Colbath is representative of dedicated judges of Florida and truly is proud to be called "judge." He responded to the same questions by stating that being a judge means "that you bear hopes, expectations, and sometimes dreams of the litigants that come before you Being a judge means not only having to do your best to do the right and proper thing, but also leaving all parties with the sense that you arrived at your decision after carefully considering and weighing their individual points of view."

When asked about some common misperceptions that laypeople may have about judges, Judge Colbath stated, "Laypeople think that a judge can summarily reach out and solve the problems that a litigant brings before him or her; that judges are not constrained by rules of procedure, concerns of due process, or conscribed by the law. The failure to meet this false expectation can lead to disappointment and distrust."

Former U.S. Attorney General Judge Griffin Bell, at a judicial conference, commented on being a judge and in his inimitable Georgia accent said, "I know we can all do better and that things are not what we would all like them to be, but let me say that the improvements during my near half century at the bar have been enormous. We are far more respectful of people's rights, judges and lawyers are better trained. . . . Simple fairness and justice are far more prevalent."

As a trial lawyer, I have had the opportunity to closely observe hundreds of judges on the bench. I have seen on the faces of judges dedication, compassion, fairness, and fatigue due to trial preparation. After their investiture and upon taking the bench, most judges accept their position of responsibility, diligently deliver fair decisions, and make personal sacrifices. Too often, the calling of judges receives little public attention. The Florida Bar takes this opportunity to recognize the bench for your daily successes and contributions to all Floridians.