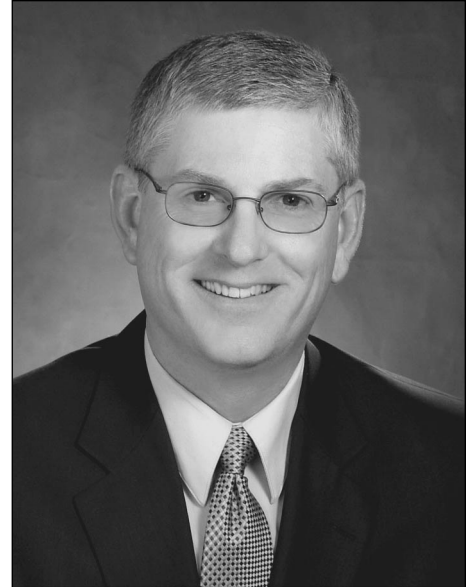


# A Fond Farewell to Judge Schnelz

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Many readers familiar with the Oakland Circuit bench know by now that the Honorable Gene Schnelz will retire July 7. This month's column is written in tribute to Judge Schnelz's service to the legal profession, administration of justice, and the citizens of Oakland County.

But before tribute is paid, do you know what Judge Schnelz has in common with the box-office sensation "Jaws," Tiger Woods, the country music hit "Thank God I'm a Country Boy," and the Thriller in Manila starring Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali? Give up? They all debuted in 1975 - the same year that Judge Schnelz took the bench for the first time in what would become a stellar 33-year judicial career.

1975! The average cost of a new car was \$3,800. A nice suburban house went for \$42,600. You could mail a letter for a dime and buy a gallon of gas for \$0.57.

The Cincinnati Reds, managed by George Lee Anderson, beat the Boston Red Sox four games to three to win the World Series. Mr. Anderson, known affectionately as "Sparky," would later manage the Tigers.

"All in the Family" was all the rage, "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" was winging its way toward Best Motion Picture, and the Carpenters were on top of the world with "Please, Mr. Postman."

Women wore big hoop earrings, Gunne Sax dresses and tube tops ... not all at the same time. Men wore tie-dye shirts at leisure, and polyester leisure suits at work. My, how times have changed. And that's not all bad, particularly with respect to leisure suits!

One thing hasn't changed - Judge Schnelz could always be found on the bench, faithfully serving the citizens of Oakland County. It isn't merely for 50 years of service for which tribute should be paid - 33 years as a judge and 17 years as a practicing attorney - but for what he has done in those 50 years, and how he did it.

It is estimated that Judge Schnelz handled more than 49,000 cases during his nearly 28 years as a circuit judge. That doesn't include probation violations or reopened cases, nor does it include the cases he handled while serving as a district judge in the 52nd District Court in Walled Lake from 1975 through 1978. We have no records, but imagine the number of people - litigants, attorneys, jurors, and witnesses - who visited his courtroom over the years. The number would be staggering.

It is fascinating to watch Judge Schnelz as he presides in his courtroom. I observed a portion of his criminal call recently and was struck by the realization that he plays several roles in addition to judge. I saw traces of psychologist, teacher, counselor and even minister, all supplementing his primary responsibility as judge.

I saw him cajole, admonish, scold, encourage, empathize, rebuke, reprove and excoriate - all in the space of 45 minutes. Each case evoked a different tone, inflection, and degree of sternness and firmness, but concern for the offenders was evident in every case. And so was the requirement that people coming before the court do so in a composed, dignified and respectful manner - characteristics that seem to be on the decline in today's culture.

One young man - a 20-year-old from Troy - approached the podium with counsel when his case was called. He was hunched over with one hand in his pocket. Before Judge Schnelz spoke, I knew what was coming. The young man was told somewhat sternly to stand up straight and take his hand out of his pocket. The judge mentioned that people must afford the institution of the court due respect, and that his posture belied that respect. As quickly as that moment came and went, Judge Schnelz went on to take the man's plea, showing the offender the same respect that should be due the court.

It was a teaching moment as much as an administration of justice moment. I suspect that was by design for Judge Schnelz is a teacher at heart. He taught students about

legal assistance, law-office economics, and interviewing and investigation at Madonna University for 25 years.

In a recent conversation with Judge Schnelz, his enthusiasm peaked when we embarked upon the topic of teaching. He wove this topic into a discussion about the most enjoyable part of his service as judge – that judging enabled him to help offenders understand that they only get one crack at life and that they should embrace it, improve their self-esteem, use their influence for good and be productive. He describes it as teaching from the bench – to encourage and help people to set out on the right path and make sound choices. Good life lessons for all of us.

Another characteristic that is revealed in Judge Schnelz's courtroom is humor. Those who know Judge Schnelz are acutely aware that humor is a big part of who he is. He includes humor in his arsenal of tactics when on the bench, knowing that humor can be used effectively in court to establish the message that he wants litigants to receive.

Judge Schnelz told me that his love of humor goes back to grade school and may be attributable to his father who he described as a "very funny man." He mentioned an incident as a child involving a rabid dog that was loose in front of the Schnelz household. The police arrived and decided to dispatch the dog. Several shots were fired before the task was completed, prompting Judge Schnelz's father to turn to him and sarcastically remark that Hitler had taken Europe with fewer shots.

The humorous side of Judge Schnelz continued to develop into adulthood. Had he not ascended to the bench or become a teacher, I firmly believe he could have made it as a stand-up comic. I can't think of too many people that I know who can deliver a joke, one-liner or quip with better timing or effectiveness.

In addition to his love for the law and teaching, Judge Schnelz has a passion for his church and community. It would take a separate column to list the many activities he has undertaken on their behalf. These interests pale in comparison, however, to his affection and devotion to family. He has been married to his wife, Betty Jean, for 51 years.

I learned that they met on a blind date and within hours of their introduction he matter-of-factly told her that they would be married one day ... and married they were just one year later.

They have three children: Elizabeth, who is a theatre and drama teacher at Walled Lake Central High School; Rebecca, who is the Oakland County Probate Court Administrator; and Kurt, who is a practicing attorney in Oakland County and a member of the Oakland County Bar Association's board of directors.

Judge Schnelz may retire as a jurist on July 7, but he will continue to serve the legal profession as a mediator and arbitrator and as of counsel to Kurt's law firm. He will work part time so that he can spend more time with his wife, who I think has earned his undivided attention after 51 years together.

I could have used this article to list his accomplishments, awards and recognitions – which are numerous and well-earned. But I wanted to provide some information that provides a more personal glimpse into the character and charm of a man who has for 50 years contributed mightily to the legal profession.

It didn't take me long after joining the court to realize that Judge Schnelz loves being a judge. He enjoys the work, the challenges, and the people with whom he has worked and served. If that wasn't so, he mentioned to me once, he would have retired long ago. His career choice has provided a source of professional enjoyment and satisfaction that is obvious to those of us who work with him.

For me it has been a pleasure to work with Judge Schnelz. We've shared many conversations over the years. He's done most of the talking and I've done most of the listening; but that's fine with me because a person can do well to take advantage of his wit and wisdom. We congratulate Judge Schnelz on his outstanding service these many years and wish him and Mrs. Schnelz a happy and healthy retirement.

Until next time...