Tribute to Judge Mester

by Kevin M. Oeffner
Circuit Court Administrator

Two of this Circuit Court’s longest-serving and most respected judges will retire this coming January 1: the Honorable Steven Andrews and the Honorable Fred Mester. LACHES will not be printed in December, so I want to dedicate my last two columns this year (October – Judge Mester and November – Judge Andrews) in tribute to these fine jurists who have made an indelible mark on the administration of justice in Oakland County.

On one hand this should be an easy article to write because there is so much that can be said about Judge Mester. On the other hand, I am limited by space, so where does one begin? The first thing that comes to my mind is that as fine of a jurist as is Judge Mester, he’s even a better man. He’s kind, thoughtful, considerate and absolutely passionate about serving others, particularly those who are less fortunate and experiencing life’s struggles.

Judge Mester has a few years on me, yet I don’t think I could keep up his pace. His energy level is astounding; I suspect that reservoir of energy comes from his heartfelt obligation to help others. Sometimes those of us at the courthouse who work closely with him and know him well wish he would say “no” to the seemingly endless requests of his time. I think the mere fact that he’s so often approached by others who seek his help is perhaps the ultimate compliment. People know that Judge Mester cares and he delivers.

Governor Milliken appointed Judge Mester to the bench in May 1982. Since then he has been elected four times and is currently in his 27th year as a circuit judge. Oakland County has had 65 circuit judges in its history going back to 1848, only five of whom have served longer than Judge Mester.

Judge Mester is widely respected as a judge. He has earned numerous awards and recognitions during his career, far too numerous to mention here. I do want to focus on one, however, because it is an extraordinary honor that symbolizes a career of outstanding achievement, a commitment to causes bigger than self, and exceptional service to others. It is the Fred and Lynne Mester Family Endowment created by their alma mater, Central Michigan University.

I first learned that CMU had established the Mester Endowment this past May. If you know Judge Mester, you know that he is wholly devoted to CMU. He would do anything for the University. So devoted is he, and so respected by the University, Judge Mester was asked to serve on the CMU Alumni board, a position he held for 10 years. During his tenure on the board he was elected to serve as its president for three years. In addition to chairing the board meetings, he labored vigorously to create regional alumni chapters around the United States, organize alumni and alumni events, and he paved the way for the Alumni Association to play a more vital role in University affairs.

The endowment was created by CMU to “recognize Judge Fred Mester’s legacy as a respected friend, colleague, and mentor with a judicial career spanning over 25 years and for his record as a devoted community servant through his meritorious service to the Oakland County Community.” The endowment also honors Mrs. Lynne Mester, who holds a degree in Education with a major in Sociology and minors in Biology and English.

The purpose of the endowment is to provide scholarship support to students at CMU who are enrolled in the Department of Political Science; Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work; or the Department of English Language and Literature. This is such a fitting honor, as it aptly embodies the spirit of giving that is so characteristic of Judge Mester. I know that he is somewhat overwhelmed by this honor. Kudos to CMU for such an appropriate tribute.

Judge Mester’s service as a judge is well-documented, and I will delve into that service more deeply in a moment. First, I want to briefly touch upon his service apart from that of a jurist, as it is impressive to say the least.

You know that Judge Mester is a graduate of CMU. You may not know that he served in the United States Army, rising to the rank of captain. During his military career, Judge Mester and his wife lived in Europe for three years. During that period he became adjutant of the 2nd Medium Tank Battalion, 1st Cavalry. It was also during this period of time that Mrs. Mester served as a teacher in the American military school.

Mention the military to Judge Mester and his eyes light up and the stories begin. Talk with him but two minutes about his military service and you know that he counts it a privilege unlike any other to wear the uniform of the United States armed forces.

After his military career, Judge Mester received his juris doctor from the Wayne State University Law School and
then entered the labor market as in-house legal counsel for the Chrysler Corporation. He also served as a prosecutor with the United States Attorney’s Office.

In the mid-1970s, former circuit judges William Beasley and James Thorburn paid a visit to then-U.S. Attorney Fred Mester and invited him to accept the position of Court Administrator for the Circuit Court. The judges believed that the administration of the court would become increasingly vital to the effective administration of justice, and so they sought someone with the requisite leadership skills to oversee the administrative duties of a growing court with expanding functions and responsibilities. He accepted the invitation and joined what would become his home away from home for the next 35 years.

Serving as a judge is more than a full-time job, yet that hasn’t stopped Judge Mester from going above and beyond. For years he served as an adjunct assistant professor at Oakland University, adjunct professor at Madonna University, and an adjunct professor at Oakland Community College. I have seen him in action with a courtroom full of students and I can tell you without hesitation that he has a passion to teach. He is a natural.

As mentioned earlier, Judge Mester was appointed to the bench in 1982 and has served as a judge since that time. He has been recognized many times over for his service as a jurist. But a few of the awards he received include the NAACP Humanitarian Award, the Michigan Corrections Association Judicial Award for extraordinary contributions to the enhancement of the judicial system, the State Bar of Michigan’s Champion of Justice Award and the John N. O’Brien Award for distinguished community activities. In 2005 and again in 2006, Judge Mester was named as one of Michigan’s top judges according to a Detroit News poll.

Judge Mester has a reputation of being firm but fair and compassionate. He’s also very productive. Consider these numbers: about 46,000 cases disposed, 34,000 motions decided, and more than 800 jury trials. The jury trials alone account for about 2,000 days on the bench, or more than eight years of work time.

In one sense these are just numbers, but in reality they represent people with cares, concerns and anxieties, all the while wondering how their disputes – matters of utmost importance to them – would be resolved. One could always be assured that Judge Mester would treat each matter with care, thoughtful deliberation, and great understanding. I think it was always so effortless for Judge Mester to do so because of his love for the law and his devotion to the administration of justice.

As this article explains, Judge Mester has served the legal profession, the educational arena, and his country through the Armed Forces. I sat down with Judge Mester recently and I asked when these interests started taking hold of him. It goes back to his childhood. His father’s side hails from Springfield, Illinois. His great-grandmother was personally acquainted with some folks you may have heard of – Abraham and Mary Lincoln.

Being told of that community tie as a child generated a keen interest in things historical. His love of history sprouted an interest in the law. Judge Mester’s father was a World War I veteran, serving in the Navy. His mother was a teacher at the Grant Elementary School in Royal Oak. Judge Mester took great pride when talking about his parents and their military and educational pursuits. So perhaps Judge Mester was predestined to serve his country in the Army, as an educator and a jurist as a result of his parents’ influence.

Judge Mester told me that from his earliest remembrances he felt an awesome sense of privilege to be born into such a great family and country. He watched his parents closely who gave tirelessly to others without asking for anything in return. Perhaps it was through those observations of a young child that instilled the devotion to causes bigger than self that has come to characterize Judge Mester.

There is so much more that could be said, but I am bound by space. It will be strange to walk past Courtroom 3B come January and know that Judge Mester is not sitting on the bench, but if anyone has earned the opportunity for some rest and relaxation, it is Judge Mester. I am quite certain that he will continue to give of his time and talents as that is simply a part of his chemistry.

I want to express my personal thanks to Judge Mester for the advice and support he has given me over the years. He always has a word of encouragement and for that I am grateful. It is my privilege to count him as a friend.

Until next time...

Footnote 1 This description of the Fred and Lynne Mester Family Endowment was provided by the College of Humanities and Social & Behavioral Sciences at Central Michigan University.