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Judicial Profile



HON. GLEN M. REISER

Judge

Ventura County Superior Court

PROFILE Judge Glen M. Reiser of Ventura County Superior Court doesn't like to humble or embarrass lawyers, but he is so far in front on the information superhighway that from time to time it just happens.

Case in point: The material witness failed to appear in Reiser's Simi Valley courtroom, and he wanted to know why. The attorney shook his head. We've tried to locate him without success, he replied. He's nowhere to be found.

The judge turned to his desktop computer. A few keystrokes later, he turned back and called out the "lost" witness's address and phone number.

The red-faced lawyer jotted down the information and murmured his thanks. "It's amazing what you can find on the Internet," Reiser said in recalling the incident. "Lawyers who are not conversant with computers are missing out on a great deal."

Judges, too, it appears. Reiser is part of a small, but growing cast of judges - mostly younger and relatively newer to the bench - who rely heavily on their computers on the bench, as well as in chambers.

"Lawyers can't talk off the top of their heads in Judge Reiser's courtroom," said veteran trial attorney Robert Davidson of Ventura. "When someone cites a precedent, he'll call up the case on Lexis and start checking their interpretation, point for point, while the lawyer's still talking."

Reiser, who is known for his hands-on approach, predicts the computer will eventually become as common a tool for bench officers as the desk calendar and the gavel.

"Certainly, many judges have had brilliant careers without the help of computers, but there's a whole new generation of lawyers who understand and appreciate their benefits. If, for example, an attorney cites a particular case as precedent, I don't have to ask the lawyer for a written brief. The points and authorities are right at my fingertips. I can make an informed judgment then and there and keep the trial moving right along."

Reiser said he recently attended a computer class for judges and one of the "students" was Supreme Court Justice Stanley Mosk. "The justice is, what, 87 years old, and he's eager to learn a new discipline. It's hard to imagine a more accomplished jurist, but he obviously thinks a working knowledge of computers will be beneficial."

Attorney Richard Sybert of Woodland Hills, who has appeared several times in Reiser's courtroom since he was appointed 14 months ago, said the judge is "better prepared" than many of the lawyers who appear before him. "He reads everything the lawyers submit to him, plus he does his own research on the law. Win or lose, you know you've gotten a fair hearing with Judge Reiser."

Attorney Lindsay Neilson, who has practiced for 25 years in Ventura County, agrees. "Judge Reiser has such a keen legal mind that he cuts to the chase quicker than most judges I've seen. And he does the kind of thorough research that the lawyers should be doing, and he doesn't hesitate to question witnesses when he thinks a point needs clarification."

Reiser, 45, an environmental and land use specialist for most of his 20 years in private practice, brought some progressive, albeit controversial ideas to the bench when he was appointed by Gov. Pete Wilson in December 1998. Assigned to the civil court in Simi Valley, Reiser quietly adopted the "Arizona Model" for juries, allowing panelists to discuss cases among themselves and even submit written questions to the bench during the trial.

"I believe in the system because it gives jurors the information they need to make intelligent

decisions," Reiser said. "A trial is, after all, a search for truth. If jurors have questions concerning factual issues, it's better to address them before they retire to begin deliberations. Sometimes, a panelist can be more perceptive than the lawyers and the judge; they'll come up with important questions that we've overlooked."

Reiser gave this example: In a personal injury case, the plaintiff said he was knocked off his motorcycle and claimed severe damage to his hands as he skidded along the pavement. A juror wanted to know if the biker's gloves bore skid marks.

"The question was right on point, and neither the lawyers nor myself thought to ask it," Reiser said. It turned out the gloves did not have skid marks, so the plaintiff's damage claim as it related to the accident was suspect, Reiser noted.

Reiser predicts the "Arizona Model" of jury input will eventually be adopted in civil trials, and possibly criminal trials in California. At the same time, he recognizes that not everyone will welcome the change in procedure.

"Some lawyers won't like it because they feel they're not in control. They're accustomed to asking the questions, and they already know the answers. Some judges may not like it because they're not used to juries taking such a proactive role. But from my limited experience, I can tell you that jurors love it. I've received letters from people who have served on more than one jury, and they tell me that the "Arizona Model" of service is a richer, more rewarding experience."

Attorneys who have participated in jury trials before Reiser say he works hard to make jurors feel they are an integral part of the trial experience. When jury questions arose, plaintiffs' counsel George Knopfler of Woodland Hills said Reiser would consult with both sides before deciding which questions were relevant, and whether they should be addressed by the plaintiff, the defendant or the court.

"That's one of judge Reiser's great strengths," Knopfler said. "Jury duty is an unwelcome chore for most people, but he tries to keep the interest level of the jury up, and from what I've seen he usually succeeds."

Reiser was born in San Andreas and grew up in Orange County. His parents were both teachers. After graduating from high school, he spent a year at West Point - "no specific reason, more of a romantic notion," he said - then transferred to UC Santa Barbara. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in history in 1975, then enrolled in the UCLA law school. "I was like a lot of people with degrees in history and political science. I thought briefly about teaching, but I enjoyed going to school and law seemed a better option," Reiser said.

He graduated in 1978, then joined the firm of Nordman, Cormany, Hair & Compton in Oxnard. "In the beginning, I did a bit of everything - torts, family law, constitutional law, and some appeals. I especially enjoyed jury trials because of the interaction with people."

Reiser remained with the firm 14 years, establishing himself as an expert in land use and environmental law. He was the lead defense lawyer in the notorious Oxford Dunes litigation, defending landowners accused of fraud and deceit for not disclosing that their coastal property, sold to developers for a housing subdivision, had once been a chemical waste dump site. After nearly six years of litigation, the case was settled in early 1993.

He was back in the news a year later as a special prosecutor for the Ventura County district attorney, pursuing criminal charges against a local oil company for allowing thousands of gallons of crude to spill into a wetland and seep into the ocean. Reiser forced the Berry Petroleum Co. to plead no contest and accept a \$600,000 fine. In addition, a company supervisor was sentenced to 18 months probation and 320 hours of community service. The district attorney's office expressed satisfaction with the result and praised Reiser's expertise.

The case raised some concern in legal circles, however, because Berry Petroleum was represented by Reiser's old law firm, Nordman Cormany. Reiser said he never would have accepted the assignment if he felt there was any conflict of interest.

A year later, Reiser was caught in the middle of another, more bizarre controversy, this one involving his good friend and client, District Attorney Michael D. Bradbury. The five-term district attorney, arguably the most powerful political figure in Ventura County, prosecuted Thomas Pollizzi for stalking his ex-girlfriend and threatening to kill her son. The victim was Reiser's mother, Jeri; the son was Reiser himself.

Pollizzi's attorney argued that the case properly belonged in Riverside County where Pollizzi was under a restraining order to stay away from Mrs. Reiser. Ventura County got involved

because Reiser and Bradbury were close friends, according to Deputy Public Defender Steven Lipson.

Nevertheless, Pollizzi, who was 57, agreed to plead no contest to a misdemeanor charge of stalking and serve 10 months in the Ventura County jail. Two months into the sentence, he was beaten to death by a cellmate. At the time, Reiser said he was angry at any inference of favoritism on his behalf. Bradbury was more philosophical: "I realized what the appearance might be. No matter what we did, it would be scrutinized and considered a result of some personal favoritism."

Three years later, Reiser was appointed to the Superior Court, accompanied by Bradbury's strong endorsement and the approval of the county bar who felt that private attorneys, most notably civil practitioners, were underrepresented on the Ventura County bench. Reiser spent his first year at the civil branch in Simi Valley but recently was reassigned to the criminal court in Ventura, to the dismay of many lawyers. "It's a shame to lose him," said Robert McSorley of Oxnard. "He is one of the most able civil court judges we have."

Reiser said he welcomes the change. "It's all part of the learning curve. There are new rules, new procedures, almost a new language. There are disciplines I must master if I am to be an effective jurist, and I want to be that more than anything else."

Some things will not change. "I recognize that the culture is vastly different in criminal court, but I still want to be as involved here as I was on the civil side. And I'll still push for juries to be allowed greater participation in the judicial process."

Reiser, who is divorced, has joint custody of two sons; Michael, 11, and Adam, 8. In his off hours, he enjoys running, roller blading and gym workouts.

- DICK GOLDBERG

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