



Judicial Vignette:  
San Bernardino  
County's Newest  
Superior Court Judge

by Ed Butler

*When new judges are sworn in, our field reporter, Ed Butler, Esq. interviews them and submits for your information, a "Judicial Vignette." These vignettes are added to our online collection of Benchmarks, a feature in the Bar Bulletin.*

**Judge Debra Harris**

When military base closures handed her a lemon, Judge Debra Harris made lemonade.

The judge was immersed in personnel management as an Air Force civilian employee, when the Cold War ended. Base closures became rampant and spelled a death knell for George Air Force Base, where she worked.

Judge Harris then took a career turn to law school, and ended up litigating 15 years at the San Bernardino County public defender's office.

A further career turn led to her appointment July 16 to a judge vacancy in the county Superior Court, where Aug. 3 she took up a family assignment at the Joshua Tree courthouse. She takes

the judicial post formerly occupied by retiring Judge Bert Swift.

She expresses satisfaction at embrace of her new challenge.

Judge Harris was born and raised in Birmingham, Ala., where her father worked at Birmingham Steel. Her mother was a homemaker and later a nurse. The future judge enjoyed reading and hiking as a child.

The wife of an Air Force careerist, Judge Harris came to California with his stationing at George. She attended college at night at the base's satellite campus of Golden Gate University. When it was time for law school, she transferred to Western State College of Law in Fullerton. There she earned both her bachelor of science in law and juris doctorate degree.

She was admitted to the California State Bar in 1994 and that year became a contract employee of the public defender. She then became a deputy I and advanced through the ranks to become a supervisor and finally chief deputy at the San Bernardino division, filling an administrative role there.

She says she was attracted to the law by an affinity for it, and it fit her analytical nature.

As for why she applied for a judgeship, she explains, "being a judge requires you to balance competing interests, and that

was something I felt I was good at." She likes having to be fair and impartial and in her former daily work in litigation, she came to admire judges she observed. She liked the way they made their decisions and expressed a helpful attitude toward new attorneys.

She feels becoming a judge is "a natural progression of my legal career."

She admits there is a big adjustment involved, but she savors the challenge and "I enjoy being engaged in something new like family law." She also enjoys being the leader of her court department, setting the tone and being part of the teamwork of court staff.

She likes Joshua Tree and is adjusting to the commute from her home in Victorville.

Her husband is now retired from military active duty and works for the Air Force as a civilian in aircraft survival. They have two children and two grandchildren.

Judge Harris says her favorite pastimes include walking on the beach, improving her sketching, and absorption in reading, especially historical fiction. She also is involved in community activities.

*Ed Butler is branch manager of the Law Library for San Bernardino County.*



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