



BenchMarks:
Dennis G. Cole
Superior Court Judge,
County of San Bernardino

by Ed Butler

Judge Dennis G. Cole admits that it was a hard adjustment at first, representing criminal defendants after having worked as a peace officer for more than a decade.

But adjust he did, and now he can look back with understanding and wisdom upon a judicial officer career that has spanned 19 years since his last work as attorney.

His varied work as judge has included two consecutive years as county presiding judge, in the early Nineties, helping break paths into court consolidation deemed a lifesaver for bearing the workload of the court. Much of his time judging has been spent presiding over criminal matters, as now, and family matters, two of his favorite areas.

Growing up in Baldwin Park, he dreamed of becoming a police officer as he bagged and checked in his father's grocery store. He had a chance to observe police more closely by means of his father's role as mayor of the city.

The judge recalls Baldwin Park as a "tough, blue collar little city" where he went out for football, baseball and basketball in high school. He says the demographics have changed there, in that it is now 90 percent Hispanic, whereas it used to be 80 percent Anglo and 20 percent Hispanic.

Judge Cole's father's community leadership role likely influenced the judge's choice of a political science major at Long Beach State, where he received his bachelor of arts degree in 1963, although he doesn't recall ever aspiring for elective office other than that of judge.

After Long Beach he spent a year as a Gallo Wines route salesman, before taking his first police job with the city of Garden Grove. He later was one of the first police at Carpinteria (Santa Barbara County) when it incorporated and later on the Pomona police force.

He says law enforcement was satisfying as a way to contribute to society and help people, "making at least your little world a little safer." He admits to a youthful attraction to the thrill of pursuit and arrest.

As he became attracted to the practice of law, he experienced some doubts about the violence of police work. Becoming a lawyer, as a night student at the University of LaVerne, for him "was almost a natural progression . . . almost a step in the same direction" on his career path.

Obtaining his jurisdoctor degree and license to practice in 1974, he spent 11 years in private practice emphasizing criminal defense, family, personal injury and business law.

"At first it was kind of strange" defending people accused of crimes, he admits. "I was seeing people that I used to put away." While it was a hard adjustment, he adapted to the new role as a legitimate one, realizing "these people deserve a fair hearing with a competent attorney . . . It was important that people have their day in court."

Having served as a judge pro tem in Municipal Court, Judge Cole's performance as attorney drew the admiration of judges who approached him about a commissioner opening. That gave him cause for reflection, as he was prospering as an attorney and a paid bench officer role would mean a cut in pay. That reflection led to the realization that "this opportunity would come only once in my life," and he was appointed commissioner in spring of 1985. Having proved himself still more, he was sponsored by judges again for appointment by Gov. Deukmejian to a newly created Superior Court judgeship in the fall of 1985.

Judge Cole appears to have no regrets about embracing a career as judge all these years since. He says he especially enjoys interacting with the public and implementing the system of justice. He aims to be fair and wants people to feel they have had a fair trial or fair hearing.

As judge he has presided over all kinds of calendars except juvenile, much of the time handling criminal and family cases, mostly at Rancho Cucamonga where is now, but also at Victorville and Central (San Bernardino).

He says he especially likes his present criminal assignment but also family, over which he has presided during four two to three-year fulltime stints. He finds that family adjudication "gets to be stressful" and periodically he needs relief from it. He cites an old truism to the effect that in criminal cases there are "bad people on their best behavior," and in family, "good people on their worst behavior."

Judge Cole says his biggest challenge as presiding judge, while maintaining a full calendar, was accomplishing consolidation of municipal and superior courts. Also under the leadership of Judge Peter Norell as then-Municipal Court presiding judge, the two categories of judges were convinced to fashion consolidation on the terms of the local judiciary instead of allowing terms to be dictated in a state-level central fashion, Judge Cole explains. Pioneering in consolidation, San

Bernardino and Riverside judges could see that consolidation "was the way it was going . . . with as few judicial officers that we have, that was the only way we were going to get the work done."

He says he isn't particularly interested in serving again as presiding judge, as the now-full-time role is "a whole different job now" with greater expectations under state control of facilities and finances.

Despite this, he believes assumption of control by the state has paid off in that "it's given some stability" in court finances that did not exist under county government budgeting. The state governmental budgetary hits have not been as severe as the local budgetary hits, he points out.

While his Rancho Cucamonga district is a busy one, he's pleased that cases are getting out. "If you want to get a case out we can get it out in a reasonable period of time." Further, he says family, which has been a "step child area," has benefitted from fast track scheduling implemented by district supervising Judge Paul Bryant. Mediators have been furnished to aid pro pers in advancing their civil cases.

Judge Cole says the county's judges are supportive of each other, wanting one another to "accomplish the goal of justice" and to be successful in the role. He says judges are cognizant of the performance of attorneys in terms of encouraging them to become bench officers or giving recommendations when appointments by the governor are pending.

As for general advice to attorneys appearing in his court, Judge Cole appreciates punctuality and preparedness. He especially likes to see attorneys have "a knowledge of what you're trying to accomplish," as that achieves the goal much more quickly. It's particularly frustrating to judges when attorneys aren't focused on a goal, such as which defense to plead, the judge says.

Off work, Judge Cole enjoys golf but admits his 11 grandchildren "keep me busy." Among his three children, his son is a local deputy sheriff on the bomb and arson team, one daughter is a deputy district attorney in Victorville, and another daughter partners with her mother (Mrs. Cole) in a Curves for Women exercise outlet.

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

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