



BenchMarks: Art Harrison

Superior Court Judge,
County of San Bernardino

by Ed Butler

The weighty decisions that a judge makes are a matter of sober contemplation for Judge Art Harrison.

Formerly a local prosecutor for 14 years, Judge Harrison is beginning his seventh year as Superior Court judge of San Bernardino County, now presiding over adult criminal trial court at Central District.

He finds that decision making for a judge is "a little more difficult" than for a deputy district attorney estimating prospective jail times. The judge, by contrast, is a person in the middle, Judge Harrison says. "You're looking at a living, breathing person down there, and your decisions are profoundly affecting their life." He adds, "I think we ask our judges and our jurors to make tough calls."

Judge Harrison says he has enjoyed all of his judicial assignments, which began with juvenile delinquency court, continued with juvenile dependency, and shifted to adult criminal a few years ago.

He is a judge who gets to serve the county where he spent most of his growing years. He reflects fondly upon his childhood in Redlands, back in a time when he could spend half a day exploring on his bicycle without parental worry.

One of his earliest memories from preschool years is his family's relocation from Beaumont, when he had to share the family vehicle with goats being transferred to their new rural residence in Loma Linda. After kindergarten and first grade there he grew up the rest of the way in Redlands, attending both Franklin and Crafton elementary schools.

He recalls savoring "kid things" such as fishing and catching frogs.

At Redlands High School, he went out for both interscholastic football and wrestling.

For much of his youth, he assisted his father in his masonry contracting business. The work included truck driving and miscellaneous labors, such as scraping concrete off of used brick, the character of which helped convince him that a different line of work would be preferable. His father eventually left that line of work himself, going to work for Caltrans as a highway worker and retiring as lead person.

Toward the end of high school and as he began to attend San Bernardino Valley College, Judge Harrison worked in a part-time job at Griswold's Restaurant in Redlands.

As the population of Redlands has grown, one of the most striking things is the way orange groves have vanished. "There's probably nothing better than to smell the groves when they're in bloom," Judge Harrison recalls.

He had been at college about a year, when the new draft lottery handed him a low number. Rather than wait to be drafted, he decided to enlist in the interest of obtaining desirable training. He thought about special forces, but ran into a friend who suggested warrant officer flight training in the Army. He opted for that and cleared the testing, and ended up flying helicopters on active duty for four years. His duty stations were all stateside, mostly at Fort Hood, Texas and also in training bases in Alabama, Texas and Louisiana. The Vietnam War was winding down, and while orders came for a tour there, they were rescinded.

Both on active duty and afterward, Judge Harrison majored in aviation technology at American Tech University in Texas. He had aspirations of flying for commercial airlines, but with all the pilots being released at the end of the war, fixed wing people had a major leg up over chopper pilots such as himself. He continued in the field as a civilian, however, and worked as a flight instructor and charter pilot both in Texas and based at Riverside Municipal Airport. Also in California he flew for the National Guard and military reserve, and has maintained his instructor rating to this day.

He completed his associate of arts degree at Valley College and embarked on a 10-year law enforcement career as a San Bernardino County deputy marshal. Along the way toward earning the rank of sergeant, his duties included serving criminal and civil process, enforcing court orders, serving arrest warrants, and a half year as bailiff for local Municipal Court Judge James Kramer. (The marshal's office was later absorbed by the sheriff's department.)

While working fulltime as deputy marshal, he enrolled in night law school at Citrus Belt Law School (now California Southern) in Riverside as a means of advancing himself in his work. In addition to his juris doctor degree, he also obtained a bachelor's degree there.

After passing the Bar Exam right away, "I decided to spread my wings" and seek employment as deputy district attorney, Judge Harrison explains.

He expresses appreciation for access to Citrus Belt Law School when traveling to a different law school, away from the Inland Empire, would have been precluded by other obligations. "For my needs, (Citrus Belt) was excellent," the judge says. "Law school, you get out of it what you put into it. I had some very, very fine instructors there, many of whom I have seen on the bench" in the Inland Empire.

In his 14 years as prosecutor for the San Bernardino County district attorney, his major assignments included three years in gang prosecution and 4 ½ years as chief

deputy at the Redlands branch office. He found it particularly satisfying to serve the community where he grew up. He also was assigned to the Fontana office for a time.

Judge Harrison indicates that his decision to seek judicial office in 2000 was a rather quick one. When people had suggested it, he was rather indifferent to the idea. However, elective opportunity arose in the form of a judge retiring from his office. Also, Judge Harrison anticipated a transfer out of the Redlands DA's office, and liked the idea of having a hand in fashioning his fate.

The judge has savored all of his judicial assignments. He began in juvenile delinquency court in Victorville, which gave him a sense of potential to have an impact in a young person's life. Next in dependency court, he appreciated attorneys and other staff helping him learn the ropes in an unfamiliar area. He was sobered by the impact of the court, in terms of the rewards of obtaining family reunification and the "awesome step" of termination of parental rights when necessary. He says sometimes this is needed "to allow healing to occur." However, "we make those decisions on all too regular a basis," decisions that are not taken lightly by any of the judges charged with making them, he adds.

He finds adult criminal adjudication totally different "but still you're trying to make the community a better place . . . it all comes under the (heading) of justice."

In contrast with his past work as advocate, he finds that judging in general allows him to "step back from that" and savor his current interaction with attorneys and the experience of "no better drama" than watching good lawyers duel in court.

Judge Harrison adds his testimony to the fact that local criminal court judges are hard pressed to bear the caseload that they face. "We try a lot of cases. We have to move fast to work through these higher caseloads . . . Our morning calendars are extensive." Morning appearances must compete with trial time, and then judges have to cover for other departments in the event of a judge's absence.

Judge Harrison indicates there's a sense of relief in that the legislature and governor have appropriated the money for eight judges to be added in San Bernardino County around mid-year. That's about the time that new courtrooms will be ready for occupancy in an annex courthouse in a former Caltrans building undergoing remodeling at 303 W. Third Street, San Bernardino.

Asked about crime trends, Judge Harrison says, "Unfortunately we have all too many homicides. In some years they seem to bloom and the numbers go up," apparently reflecting population growth.

Asked for a prescription for deterrence of crime, he says "it takes a community and it takes a family. Parents need to shoulder primary responsibility for upbringing of the children and I think we've gotten away from some of that." At the same time, he feels that society now is in a corrective

mode in this area “but it takes time for that to catch up and see visible results.”

He echoes those who say that parents need to know what their children are doing and limit some of the freedoms they have been given. It’s also important to know who the child’s associates are, he adds. “This starts from a relatively early age and going on up . . . being actively engaged in their children’s lives.”

Having worked with youth, he offers them some pointers when he can. “Every chance I get to encourage kids, I suggest they have plans or goals of some sort. They can change them a dozen times, but . . . if they are working towards a goal, they are always making progress upward in life,” he says.

As for points of advice to attorneys, Judge Harrison says he’s a big proponent of the drive for attorney civility propounded by the local bar association. He says attorneys need to be prepared and on time and professionally represent their client. “Those are things that we expect and usually get.”

Judge Harrison has high praise for the court staff such as clerks and bailiffs and associated employees that are “some wonderful people that make the system work.” He brings the empathy of someone who worked as a bailiff himself.

As for those new judges soon to be added, Judge Harrison says ideal candidates would have good judgment, patience, willingness to do some research on their own, the capacity to hear both sides, and the ability to make the decisions that need to be made.

Judge Harrison’s activities at the court include service on the executive committee, participating in decision making, and also the budget and probation oversight committees.

He is part of a very legal household, in that his wife, Diane, is a deputy district attorney of the county.

The couple likes to unwind these days by inline speed skating with their daughter, 17, who is competitive in the sport. The judge’s participation also includes serving as board member and coach for his daughter’s skating club.

He has two older daughters as well, one a homemaker in New York with three children, who works part-time as a sign interpreter. The other is a homemaker in Arizona, also with three children.

When he has the chance, the judge also still enjoys kayaking and mountain biking.

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

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