

BenchMarks:



Paul M. Bryant

Superior Court
Judge, County of San
Bernardino

by Ed Butler

Raised in San Bernardino, Judge Paul M. Bryant brings varied practice and bench experience to his role as supervisor of the Rancho Cucamonga District of San Bernardino County Superior Court.

Now presiding over criminal matters, Judge Bryant emphasizes the importance of efficient handling of cases as he savors many facets of jurisprudence.

A thoroughly local product, Judge Bryant was born at Fontana Kaiser Hospital to a fireman at Kaiser Steel who retired as superintendent in charge of plant protection. Growing up, he went out for Little League and Pony League and partook of several other sports. His main extra curricular activity in school was playing trumpet, starting in sixth grade and continuing in dance band and orchestra at San Bernardino High School.

San Bernardino State College was a newborn entity when Judge Bryant enrolled as the first college student in his family. He graduated from the school as a political science and philosophy double major. He worked his way through school, in summer as a laborer at Kaiser Steel and during the school year "busting tires" at Sears, Inland Center. His other past work experience includes appliance and men's clothing sales, neither of which was his cup of tea.

Judge Bryant reflects fondly upon the orange groves and vineyards of the valley's past. He remembers San Bernardino with a small town flavor, back when people didn't lock their doors and left their keys in the car. Judge Bryant envisioned a teaching career as he completed his undergraduate studies. He embarked upon teaching history and substituting in the Los Angeles schools, as he pursued graduate studies in philosophy at Cal State, Northridge.

Along the way, a couple of good friends encouraged him to look at the law, and while teaching during the day, he studied in the night program at Whittier College of Law. Graduating there in 1975 as president of its Student Bar, Judge Bryant explains, "I tried it, I liked it. I thought it was interesting, challenging." It also coincided with his interest in history and philosophy.

Armed with his new license to practice, he became associated in 1976 with attorneys Jim McGuire, now judge at Joshua Tree, and John Hardy. With them his general practitioner work included criminal defense and specializing in representation of mental patients.

Judge Bryant regrets some law changes affecting the mentally ill. "I think it was a better society when (people now homeless) were in more structured settings. They were safer," he says.

An itch for more trial work led him to a nine-year career prosecuting major crimes for the San Bernardino County district attorney's office. Having been a criminal defense attorney, he was now prosecuting high profile homicides and would later preside over homicide cases as a local judge.

Furthering his career, Judge Bryant was hired as a municipal court commissioner in late 1985. His varied assignments at benches all around the county included small claims. Asked for his opinion of small claims court on television, he says his experience at the time was that these shows tended to emphasize bizarre cases and created an attraction for them. An example was women who sued their beauty operator when a hairdo failed to lead to success at a job interview.

After a couple years as commissioner, Judge Bryant was picked by Gov. Deukmejian to serve as municipal court judge. In his year in that role at Ontario he acted as supervisor while presiding over all types of misdemeanor cases. Deukmejian moved him up to Superior Court in September 1989.

His varied assignments as Superior Court judge began with a mixture of criminal, civil and domestic cases for 1½ years at Victorville. He then returned to West Valley to preside over family matters for 2½ years, before switching to civil there for a seven-year stint. He's been back on criminal matters ever since.

Judge Bryant expresses a preference for the variety and newness of presiding over civil cases. He also enjoys family adjudication because "often you feel you have made a difference because people are going through a very difficult time." Family is relatively "draining," however, he admits.

At present, Judge Bryant draws upon his long criminal bench background to support an efficient flow of caseload, which he says is paramount. He says criminal matters will "eat up everything else on the calendar, due to strict time deadlines, unless they are handled efficiently. He says "keeping the criminal under control" at Rancho Cucamonga has allowed the district to virtually dedicate five of its departments to civil matters.

Another major support to efficiency, the judge says, is contracting with IVAMS, a private judge organization, to run mandatory

settlement conferences. He says this frees valuable bench time and "has been a very successful program for us" in both civil and family matters.

Now Rancho supervisor for 1½ years, Judge Bryant performs various oversight duties in association with court administration, the clerk's office and bar. He formerly supervised in the family area when he presided over such cases.

Judge Bryant says court consolidation was a "godsend to the Superior Court" because it made former Municipal Court judges available to bear a wider spectrum of cases. He said this change resulted in Rancho's allocation of civil case judges increasing from two to five, and family from two to three.

Judge Bryant indicates that judging is a great source of professional satisfaction.

"I think it is a great honor to be a judge," he says. "I enjoy the interaction with lawyers. I enjoy the intellectual challenge. I like the sense at the end of the day that I have done the best that I could."

He indicates that for him advocacy was not always as satisfying, in that application of lawyering skills wasn't always toward an internally gratifying result.

As for general advice to attorneys, Judge Bryant would encourage them to "be on time and be prepared." He says there's nothing more disheartening for a judge than to read the paperwork and then see attorneys on the matter "who know less about the case than the judge does." Sometimes its a traveling attorney from elsewhere who has not familiarized himself enough with a case prepared by an associate.

Also, it's important that attorneys in need of continuances on law and motion notify the court as soon as possible.

While it's only human to make mistakes, "the best lawyers are invariably polite and prepared," Judge Bryant finds.

As for his family life, Judge Bryant has a son teaching economics at Chaffey College and a daughter, a prospective attorney, attending San Francisco State University.

The judge says his favorite leisure time pursuits are reading history and philosophy, walking, restaurant dining and travel.

Ed Butler is Manager of the Rancho Cucamonga Branch of the San Bernardino County Law Library.

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