



## **BenchMarks: Patrick J. Morris**

**Superior Court Judge,  
County of San Bernardino**

by Ed Butler

**E**mploying the power of a judge to renew lives with new strategies is a way of life for Judge Patrick J. Morris, local and international pioneer of the drug court program.

A whirlwind of judicial innovation and involvement, he says the overflowing gratefulness of rescued treatment court clients spurs him on a busy schedule of court supervision and judging, state and national policy leadership, and a long list of community activities. He has received numerous honors bearing witness to his achievements.

Presiding at the San Bernardino Central Court, Judge Morris has been immersed since 1993 in a growing program of diverting eligible criminal defendants to treatment programs which allow them to avoid incarceration by meeting rehabilitation conditions under court supervision. The proven drug court program is now available at all courts in San Bernardino County, and has been expanded to use treatment conditions for criminal defendants in the mental health, juvenile and domestic violence areas.

Judge Morris says his public service orientation was greatly influenced by the inspiration of President John F. Kennedy, who famously asked his fellow citizens to ask what they could do for their country. He was all the more spurred by the president's untimely death, focusing himself on social service involvement supporting youth and family.

Judge Morris grew up in an involved family in Needles, where his Santa Fe Railroad conductor father was councilman and mayor for many years, and active as a union leader and Democratic Party member.

Judge Morris admits that growing up in the searing heat of Needles was somewhat austere, with all the sunshine posing risk of over-exposure, but "you learn to live with it." Living with a swamp cooler that didn't make much of a dent in 120-degree days, he and his brother and sister relished cooling dips in the Colorado River when they had the opportunity. One of the pastimes for him and brother Phillip, another San Bernardino County judge, was to wield long guns for hunting ducks and geese on the river and rabbits and quail in the New York Mountains nearby.

Schools were relatively of intimate size in Needles, resulting in everybody going out for all sports and filling offices on the student council. Judge Morris' graduating high school class was approximately 40 members strong.

The railroad for which his father worked was a major source of jobs for the growing youth of Needles. The judge was hired on as an engineer's helper at age 14, and for several summers performed the very physical work of installing replacement ice in the "reefer cars," freight cars hauling California produce that were stocked with ice at either end, fans blowing inward to preserve the produce. Ice back then was replaced in Colton and again at

Needles, location of Santa Fe's largest ice plant, where by arrival the previous load had all melted.

Judge Morris says his father insisted that his boys perform the laborious work, including chopping of 300-pound ice cakes, to discourage the easy temptation of a life of relatively well paid railroad work.

The judge continued at the ice plant after enrolling in the University of Redlands, where he majored in political science, serving as plant clerk during the summer. At U of R he exhibited a penchant for keeping very active, a lifelong habit, by serving as class president in his sophomore and senior years and competing on the baseball and debate teams.

He says his enrollment in the Stanford University School of Law derived from a prior interest in international relations, which had been recommended to him by a U of R professor. However, a career diplomat advised him to go to law school instead, expressing frustration that changing presidential administrations had a way of upending diplomatic initiatives.

The judge says he advanced to a brakeman job at the railroad, and that really helped defray expenses at Stanford, where he found time to serve as president of the student bar association.

After being admitted to the State Bar in 1963 he took his first practice job in a civil firm in Palo Alto. It was somewhat frustrating in that he didn't get the trial experience that he wanted. About that time came the assassination of JFK, "a seminal event" in that the president "was my guiding political light at the time" and Judge Morris was all the more inspired to pursue public service.

This prompted him to call Bill Lathrop, San Bernardino County district attorney, from whom he received his next job, that of prosecutor. The judge's wife Sally finished her teaching contract at San Carlos and they relocated back to San Bernardino County. Here he received a heaping helping of litigation experience, around 40 jury trials in just three years at the DA's office.

Armed with this experience, he joined a San Bernardino law firm, Lonergan, Jordan and Gresham, where he resumed a civil practice career with emphasis in family law. He later partnered with a law school classmate, John Kennedy, and then his brother, Phillip Morris, who entered the law after a career as a school teacher. All three men were destined to become San Bernardino judges.

Judge Patrick Morris says his practice was going well when George Porter, the local bar association president, encouraged him to apply for a judicial appointment, regardless of his litigation experience. At first he declined the idea, but Porter persisted and further reflection made Judge Morris realize that judging could have real public service value.

Upon his appointment by Gov. Jerry Brown, Jr. in 1976, he immediately exhibited his organizational side by setting out to revamp family adjudication by setting up a permanent court for it. Until then the family calendar had been passed around "like it was a hot potato" and there was no oversight, as Judge Morris recalls. Thus began a long career of judicial administrative innovation, training and leadership that continues to this day.

Within two years of his appointment as judge Judge Morris was supervising the county's family court, and after that spent three years as presiding judge of the entire Superior Court. Then came five years serving as presiding judge of Juvenile Court, before six years supervising the local criminal courts.

His criminal courts work led to his introduction in 1993 to the drug court program, which had been

started in Florida by former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno. Captivated by how treatment supervised by the court was turning the lives of addicts around, Judge Morris embraced the concept as "a remarkable crusade" that has paid off handsomely in terms of both rebuilding lives and saving taxpayers' money. Having chaired the state Drug Court Task Force for four years on invitation by the state Chief Justice, Judge Morris says the treatment program costs taxpayers one-tenth as much as the \$30,000 it costs to house a state prisoner for a year, and enrollees have a 75 percent graduation rate with a low rate of recidivism.

Judge Morris says this treatment concept, with continued court supervision, has been found suitable to other areas such as mental health and domestic violence. California has named the expanded program "collaborative justice courts" and since 1999 Judge Morris has been a member of the state Judicial Council committee addressing the subject.

Judge Morris says Proposition 36, mandating treatment in lieu of incarceration for early stage offenders, has been "very much a mixed bag." While it succeeds at interdicting drug habits of modest users, it's "not nearly strong enough" for hard core users who "flush right through" until the time that court sanctions can be imposed. The judge says the key elements that make drug court work are judicial contact over the course of treatment, sanctions such as jail time and testing to make sure the client is compliant. Meanwhile Prop. 36 procedures have a poor track record in terms of a heavy relapse rate, with available resources lacking.

Judge Morris says application of drug court principles in mental health is at an early stage, but it's hoped that the method can help stop warehousing of mentally ill defendants in county jails.

In addition to being a leader on the local bench, Judge Morris has been a leader and mentor of judges statewide. Having served on the state Judicial Council in 1991-93, he was president of the California Judges Association in 1992-93 and in 1984-85 chaired the judicial studies program of California Judicial Education and Research (CJER). He has taught judges on many occasions and has presented the drug court concept at the United Nations and in Ireland, England and Italy.

Having served as a judge for nearly 29 years, Judge Morris says he appreciates "the opportunity to help people," recognizing that "the courts are like the social service (emergency) room" where people are facing their most severe social crises. He enjoys collaborating with community leaders such as Jack Brown, head of Stater Brothers, and Dale Evans in establishing such things as the Children's Fund, a public-private partnership that provided the means to set up San Bernardino's Children's Protection Center for supporting and analyzing cases of child physical and sexual abuse.

Gratified to witness improvements in people's lives and thanks to continued good health, Judge Morris says he has no intention of retiring.

He has praise for the local judiciary who, despite bearing the highest per judge caseload in the state, have "borne up very well" working hard and incorporating efficiencies to help get the job done. He says one of the most important measures supporting efficiency was California's switch to a single level trial court. The state is still unique in this approach, as one of only seven states nationwide that have done it.

As for parties representing themselves, Judge Morris says "we're trying all the time to be more creative" about supporting access to justice by such persons.

Under development now is the concept of "unified family court" which takes a broad view "to find solutions for dysfunctional families that find their way to the courthouse," the judge says.

Asked for advice in general for attorneys appearing in his court, Judge Morris says, "I expect people to be on time, prepared, ready to dialogue about possible settlement of their cases," along with having discussed available services with their clients. Also, if an attorney expects to be late, he needs to call the court with an estimated time of arrival.

Judge Morris has received many honors over the years in his professional achievement as judge. Examples include the "Jurist of the Year" award from the state Judicial Council in 1994, the League of Women Voters Civic Leadership Award in 1990, and the Robert Presley Judicial Award for Leadership in Service to Youth in 1989.

The judge has been active in a wide range of community and professional activities as both local attorney and judge. While an attorney, he served several years on the San Bernardino city

school board, founded the Boys Club of San Bernardino, and served as chairman of the city parks and recreation commission. He also served on the boards of the local Legal Aid Society and the California Trial Lawyers Association, and began service that continues as a member of the University of Redlands board of trustees and as elder of the local Presbyterian Church.

Since becoming judge in 1976, he founded the local Children's Network, a collaboration of local services, and has served as president of the San Bernardino Kiwanis Club, the state Judges Association, and the National Association of Drug Court Professionals.

Asked to offer words of encouragement to others participating in public service, Judge Morris said: "If you do it for the right reason, if you see you can make a difference . . . the payoff is that you can see the changes that you make. It will live itself out in your lifetime of service."

He's especially gratified to support effective, fulfilled life for families. "You're energized by your success stories, and if you keep looking for that rainbow . . . you let that drive you forward."

He credits his strong Presbyterian faith as an impactful factor in his life.

Judge Morris and wife Sally have two adult children, a son practicing law in Riverside and daughter who is a consultant, and two grandchildren.

Off work, the judge is a physical fitness buff, playing tennis three mornings a week and running 3 1/2 miles five days a week. He has a long history of climbing well known peaks with crampons and ice axes and has run five marathons.

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

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