



BenchMarks: Ingrid A. Uhler

Superior Court Judge,
County of San Bernardino

by Ed Butler

Superior Court Judge Ingrid A. Uhler is a congenial woman of capacity who seems to take naturally to bearing double workloads.

Having completed her tenth year as criminal court judge at Rancho Cucamonga District, Judge Uhler continues to savor that role while serving as devoted mom to two sons, 12 and six.

Her busy schedule isn't something new for her. She finished high school a year early and moved out on her own at 18, essentially supporting herself on a full-time university student schedule leading to her graduation from law school at age 24. Along the way she managed to graduate summa cum laude from Arizona State University, Tempe, as a political science major, and obtain her juris doctor degree with distinction at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Judge Uhler brought substantial litigation experience to her role as judge, having served as a deputy district attorney of Los Angeles County for 12 years. She remains enamored of criminal law, presiding in the same Rancho Cucamonga courtroom where she began on Gov. Pete Wilson's appointment in late 1995.

Judge Uhler admits that it was a painful birthing process at first adapting herself to criminal litigation as a prosecutor. Public speaking in the courtroom was foreign to her, and then she adapted to it. Later, her effective human relations with other officers of the court led to judges encouraging her to try judging.

Judge Uhler was mostly reared in Arizona, the youngest of five children of a family physician and his German war bride. That was after she was born in Taiwan, while her father was on CIA assignment, and a brief toddler time in Virginia.

She reports that water skiing was a favorite pastime of hers growing up, and she remains fond of water sports. The family's recreation included lake camping and vacation pursuits while accompanying her father to medical conventions.

As a student at Westmont High School in Mesa, AZ, Judge Uhler enjoyed swimming, art classes and singing in the chorus.

She was eager to earn her own money as a teenager, starting out bagging groceries at 15. At 16 she began a long career at McDonald's Restaurants, becoming a manager at 18 and remaining with the company until her senior year at university. Then she switched to waitress work. As a law student she clerked for attorneys.

"I was basically working when I was in school," she recalls. "I think it was easier to do that" before increasing competition added scheduling headaches for college students.

She describes work in the law as "really all I wanted to do." She suggests that television shows such as Perry Mason may have played a role in her career choice.

However, early on she did not visualize herself being a litigator, but saw herself as a transactional or research attorney. Fate was to change all that, however.

Having settled in the Los Angeles area with her husband, Jerry, whom she met there during his work for the Secret Service, she first accepted a civil practice job as associate of Althouse and Bamber in Upland. She practiced some family law and contracts and researched for four months before her pending application to the Los Angeles DA's office came to fruition. She went for it, as the pay was much better.

Suddenly immersed in the litigation rigors of a prosecutor, she found the adjustment a hard one. She recalls crying almost the entire first two months. However, "I kept at it and I got better," she recalls. She recalls the encouragement of her supervisor in the DA's office, Mike Brenner, now an Orange County judge, and also that of her former employers at the Upland law office. At one point she asked for her job back there, but they encouraged her to persist.

What resulted was a love affair with criminal law, including prosecutorial assignments in the sex crimes unit and career criminal unit. She recalls winning a conviction of a popular junior high school teacher found to have molested a young boy, after having been acquitted twice and benefiting from strong student and parent backing of the teacher. She undertook many child molestation and rape prosecutions. She also prosecuted numerous career criminals facing severe sentence enhancement, including many representing themselves.

As for developing an interest in judging, she recalls looking up to judges as role models and their encouraging her to apply for judicial appointment. "I hoped to have an opportunity to be a judge of like kind," she recalls. She believes her capacity to work well with others in court lent credence to her application.

Her application for appointment had languished for several years, when suddenly the call came from the governor's office. In the meantime, she had taken a year's leave to tend to her firstborn son, and then prosecuted on a part-time, shared assignment. She didn't do any political groundwork to win the appointment. "I think I was at the right place at the right time," she says.

She seems to have adapted well to the judicial role, having served as Rancho Cucamonga criminal courts supervisor during most of her judicial tenure. Within the first year of her appointment, she had the role of assistant supervising Municipal Court judge. Supervision responsibilities include regulation of workflow by department.

In addition to bearing her judicial responsibilities, she had the distinction of

being the first pregnant judge of the county, bearing her second son now six years old.

Judge Uhler describes criminal adjudication as something she's very comfortable with. She notes that court consolidation brought all crimes, misdemeanors and felonies, under the same umbrella, resulting in an interestingly varied range of subject matter. She handles all facets of criminal court in her department, and thus far has presided over five death penalty cases.

Asked about crime trends over the past 10 years, Judge Uhler says she has observed a reduction in incidence of residential burglaries and driving under the influence of alcohol, but an increase in auto theft and ID theft. She feels the rates of gang-related homicide, murders and domestic violence have remained pretty constant.

She says she really felt the county's judge shortage when Judge Larry Allen became presiding judge and his share of criminal defendants had to be distributed among other judges of the district. In her case, the addition of defendants with last names starting with "C" boosted her caseload to the point of 200 arraignments in a single morning. Since then, another criminal court judge has been assigned and workload of criminal calendars is within 5 percent of equal sharing of defendants.

Among other issues, she says the contempt hearing procedure — encouraging jurors to respond to their summonses — has helped a little to improve the response rate. The follow-up notice allows the non-responsive citizen to either pay a fine or show up for jury service. Judge Uhler feels neglect of the summons is not always intentional, but can result from good faith oversight due to early notice of the service date.

Judge Uhler doesn't mince words about the impact of premature release of county jail prisoners due to lack of jail space. She says this dilemma forces the issuance of new warrants for arrest for non-appearing defendants, and the cycle continues when the FTA defendant is released on a citation. She says this is a workload burden which results in failure to get criminal allegations finally resolved, some of which are for very minor crimes. "Until they come to court we can't clear it up," she says.

Judge Uhler is a judge who prefers to pose most voir dire questions of jurors herself. She says some attorneys are happy to have her ask the more sensitive questions, and there is indication that the jurors may be more forthcoming answering the judge rather than an advocate.

Judge Uhler says most judges, including her, oppose speaking objections aired in front of the jury. While trying to avoid sidebar conferences on objection issues, she makes a point to provide an opportunity to have objections, responses and the rationale of her ruling placed on the record.

As for what she enjoys about being a judge, "I think I like being a mediator," Judge Uhler explains. She adds that she likes to support resolution of issues, achieving a meeting of minds, and meting an appropriate sentence. While she enjoyed the role of prosecutor, "I

don't have to win" in her present capacity, and she has no desire to go back to the "24/7" of "living and breathing" advocacy for the people.

Asked to suggest good traits for a prospective judge, Judge Uhler says the person should be a good listener, open minded, fair, impartial, and have no hidden agenda. The judge needs to know the law and follow it, and if knowledge of it is lacking, needs to research it.

"You've got to do what is right. That's the bottom line for a judge," she says. "You have to live with your own decisions."

Judge Uhler expresses admiration for the work of attorneys appearing before her, including their getting along with each other. Knowing how they may be juggling several cases at once, she tries to be flexible about adjusting appearance times when there are schedule conflicts. One thing that annoys her is to receive motions without worth or value. "If I get a motion, I want it to have some real meat to it, some issues to it," she explains.

Judge Uhler says she feels "really lucky" to have a career she enjoys and also an engaging family life. Her husband retired from the Secret Service when their second son was born and since then worked several years in security for Verizon and now Southern California Edison.

The family enjoys water sports and snow boarding together and the folks are supportive of the boys' immersion in roller and ice hockey, accompanying them on tournament trips.

"Basically our lives revolve around our kids," Judge Uhler says, explaining that she feels a duty to be available to them evenings and weekends.

Her other interests include regular gym workouts on lunch break and tending to numerous family pets, including two Labrador retrievers.

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

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