



BenchMarks: A. Rex Victor

Superior Court Judge,
County of San Bernardino

by Ed Butler

A go getter who was working by age 11 or 12, Judge A. Rex Victor remains a youthful, energized go-getter at age 69 as presiding judge of San Bernardino County Juvenile Court.

While he has filled a wide variety of judicial assignments in his 18 years as Superior Court judge, he is especially sobered and stimulated by the weighty impact of his court's dependency and delinquency arms in the lives of challenged children of the county.

Sharing the juvenile bench with five other judges, he starts his work day as early as 7 a.m., coping with strict time deadlines and a caseload bursting at the seams.

The father of five women, Judge Victor expresses his heart for children as he emphasizes rehabilitation of delinquents and reuniting dependent children with their parents if possible.

He was one of six siblings growing up in Omaha, Neb., and as it turned out, the only one to graduate from college. The son of a Mobile Oil warehouseman, he early developed the habit of working. He was working in a liquor store by age 11 or 12 and a grocery store at about 12. He can't remember when he didn't have some sort of job; sports pursuits were limited to informal sandlot football, baseball and soccer. His jobs over the years included that of stevedore, janitor, waiter and ditch digger. To make ends meet during the Depression, his mother worked as a laundress and dress maker and staffed a bakery outlet sales counter during World War II.

Judge Victor graduated at age 21 from St. Louis University, St. Louis, Mo., with a bachelor of science degree in business and finance. Anticipating being drafted into the military, he joined his sister and her husband in Southern California, where they both worked for the Pomona division of General Dynamics. While the draft did not materialize for him, a General Dynamics job did, in its planning and estimating department working on contract proposals to the federal government. Working there he met his future wife, Becky, a fellow employee.

Judge Victor's interest in the law was kindled when the company established a law department at Pomona. One of the lawyers who worked there was Kenneth Ziebarth, who encouraged Judge Victor to go to law school and, in the capacity of Superior Court judge, swore in Judge Victor as a Gov. Deukmejian appointee judge in 1986.

Judge Victor says he observed lawyers to be interesting and smart people and he undertook, as then a father of three, to enroll in the night program at Loyola University of Los Angeles School of Law. Continuing to work at General Dynamics, he shifted to its

contract department. He says the company invited him after passing the Bar Exam to join its legal team, but wanting to broaden his horizons, he became in 1968 a deputy district attorney of San Bernardino County. As he recalls, the thought of trial work was rather intimidating, so "I thought the best way to do it was to try it." It was typical of that era for trial attorneys to cut their teeth at the DA's office. In his four years there, he prosecuted cases ranging from infractions to death penalty cases, the latter including attempted murder of a prison guard by two life incarcerated.

His next career phase was partnering in an Ontario-based law firm for three years, mostly in civil practice but also appointive criminal defense assignments. As appointee he took over a criminal case that led to establishing the limited defense of necessity for escape from a state prison.

When 1975 rolled around, he rejoined the district attorney's office in the administrative capacity of assistant district attorney. He was recruited for the role by newly elected DA Jim Cramer, whom Judge Victor had worked under at the Ontario DA's office when Judge Cramer was chief deputy there.

After that Judge Victor spent five years as a sole practitioner attorney in San Bernardino, practicing in business, corporate, real estate and criminal areas.

He says he had no difficulty switching from criminal prosecution to defense and back again. He says prosecutors draw satisfaction from representing "the good side" and for defenders, "your satisfaction was doing a good job for your client."

He says he enjoyed the wide variety of law practice he undertook and feels the variety was "a great preparation for being a judge." Encouraged by his experience in applying for bench office, "I saw some judges I very much admired. I observed their objectivity, their ability to communicate, the fact that they were learned and respected in the law."

Just as he embraced variety as an attorney, Judge Victor has sought change in judicial assignment every 3-5 years. At first his calendars were divided among civil, criminal and probate, before he spent several years with fulltime vertical criminal calendars. Then came five years presiding over civil matters, three years presiding over juvenile court, five years on civil fast track, and two years now back presiding over juvenile court. Along the way he also spent several years in the Superior Court appellate department and has served on the State Appellate Court by assignment.

Judge Victor says his favorite assignment is civil, as "it's the most challenging, the broadest, it has the most variety." However, he views juvenile court as the most important assignment, due to the impact that it has.

He says the biggest challenge at juvenile court is coping with the sheer volume of caseload. Time lines are strictly applied, and a study has found that San Bernardino should have 9.8 dependency judges instead of the two that are devoted to that. The other four juvenile judges are devoted to delinquency matters, two at San Bernardino and one each at Rancho Cucamonga and Victorville.

Describing juvenile delinquency court as "criminal court with a heart," due to its emphasis upon rehabilitation over punishment, Judge Victor says dispositions must be reached promptly to be meaningful for growing youth as well as to accommodate the rules of procedure. He points out that different strategies of rehabilitation will work with some youth but not with others. He says the

county has tended to give priority with limited resources to juvenile court services, but the resources of probation services need to be supplemented with more preventive services. Meanwhile, state budgeting for the new fiscal year was up in the air.

Addressing juvenile crime trends, Judge Victor feels there has been an increase in violent and drug crime, greater randomness in violence, and a greater incidence of female defendants. He estimates that drug abuse is involved in 60-70 percent of local delinquency cases and more than one fifth of 470 juvenile hall incarcerated are in need of psychotropic drugs.

It troubles him that 70 to 80 of those confined in the hall are awaiting trial in adult court.

While the new Rancho Cucamonga juvenile hall reduced crowding and another would open this summer in Apple Valley, Judge Victor says the Central Juvenile Hall in San Bernardino is antiquated and inadequate, with a resulting high cost in personnel in maintenance.

He says there have been positive results from the recently approved house arrest program, in which enrollees are closely monitored with daily visits by probation officers. The county still operates one boot camp at Heart Bar in the local mountains, which the judge says is popular with incarcerated for its short 90-day term but a mixed blessing in terms of rehabilitation success.

Judge Victor describes dependency court as "family court with a vengeance," in that sometimes parental rights are lost and the children must be put up for adoption. There is a legal deadline of 18 months to reunify children in protective care with their parents. Rehabilitation is evaluated in six-month increments.

Judge Victor sees drug abuse as a major problem in dependency, implicated in 80 to 90 percent of such cases. He is outraged to see pregnant women continue to use drugs knowing that is harming their child.

He says the juvenile justice system aims for all parties in dependency matters to be fairly represented, with a new court building slated to open this summer. He praises the attorneys as "the strength of the dependency court, in my mind."

Judge Victor has high praise for the attorneys with whom he associates in court. "I thoroughly enjoy the company of attorneys - I like the way their minds work." He says judges learn from attorneys, as he did presiding over probate matters when he was still green in that area.

Generally, he appreciates it when attorneys in his court are prompt, prepared and professional. He reports rarely having perceived uncivility on the part of lawyers, and when it happens, it is more likely in the civil area.

Along with a busy practice and judging schedule, Judge Victor has engaged himself as a policy maker for several organizations. He was trustee of the county law library for perhaps a dozen years as both attorney and judge, and he has served as director of the local bar association, chamber of commerce and Inland Counties Legal Services.

Off work he is an avid reader with eclectic tastes and still ice skates, but his favorite hobby these days is indulging his grandchildren, who range from seven months to 14 years of age.

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