

Tressa S. Kentner:

A Profile of San Bernardino County Courts' Chief Executive Officer

By Ed Butler

Tressa S. Kentner once dreamed of becoming a clinical psychologist, and later a private business administrator.

Circumstances led her to try local government employment. She ended up captivated by public administration, and has excelled in it. This month she marks her 11th anniversary as executive officer of San Bernardino County Superior Court.

Late this summer, California Chief Justice Ronald M. George honored her with an award recognizing her exemplary court service and leadership.

The chief justice cited her longtime court administration leadership at the state as well as local level. He recognized her "innovative, effective and non-stop" accomplishments in developing a unified clerk's office, using automation and technology to make case processing and all functions more efficient, and adaptations to respond to work flow needs. She has filled a variety of leadership roles in the statewide court system.

San Bernardino County Presiding Judge Peter Norell praised Ms. Kentner for effectively combining the interests of statewide and local courts in her leadership activities.

The daughter of a Navy careerist, Ms. Kentner exhibits a good soldier's unassuming devotion to duty. She flashes with passion when she discusses such things as San Bernardino County's grievous shortage of judgeships, up against its workload, and the idea of channeling tens of millions into rehabilitation of a 1926 courthouse with serious design deficiencies.

Ms. Kentner got to see much geography in her early years, as the family relocated from one to another of her father's Navy duty stations. Before he retired as a chief in radio operation when she was 10, they had lived in

Alaska, Virginia, Stockton, the Bay Area and Southern California.

She spent her junior high and high school years in Ventura County, where her favorite extra-curricular pursuits included reading and 4-H projects such as sheep raising and sewing. An early training ground for leadership activities were miscellaneous student activities in high school, such as American Field Service and the girls' equivalent of Key Club.

She earned her bachelor's degree at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a psychology major who elected a hefty amount of statistics courses. While she once envisioned earning a doctorate and pursuing a career in psychotherapy, marriage came along and the couple settled in Ventura County. After pursuing miscellaneous jobs during a recessionary period in the mid-1970s, she says she received her "first real job" as a welfare eligibility worker of Ventura County. This led into about a year as a social worker of the county, recruiting people for the Big Brother-Big Sister program.

Her entry into welfare fraud investigation for Ventura approximately corresponded with her enrollment in the master of business administration program at California State University, Northridge. While she envisioned going into the private sector, after getting the MBA she won a job as administrative assistant in the Ventura district attorney's child support division. The work made her realize she had a taste for public administration. "I like to look at process. I like to look at how organizations are put together," she explains.

After about 3 1/2 years with the Ventura DA, she ascended to the role of general manager of the family support division of the Santa Clara County district attorney. She held the post approximately seven years, during which the office achieved a significant increase in collections and orders for child support and establishment of paternity.

Armed with these administrative credentials, in early 1990 she became executive officer of Sonoma County Superior Court. During her nearly five years there she oversaw the

unification of Municipal and Superior clerks' offices and became executive officer of the joint operation. Her current tenure at San Bernardino started in late 1994.

Among her activities spotlighted by the special award from the chief justice, her office has re-engineered case processing to handle workload more efficiently. She explains that a software program was found that allows for time and motion analysis of handling different kinds of cases brought to the court. The study assesses each kind of court matter or step according to what is "best process" for handling it, and then provides an estimate of the time needed to accomplish it in the best way. These findings allow the court to allocate staffing as needed as workload fluctuates. The time efficiency approach is adaptable to both changing law and discretionary leanings of local court districts. Included in the process is compilation of effective procedures to be followed and an associated training program under the direction of the court staff development officer.

Ms. Kentner says the court has adopted the philosophy that units of work should be accomplished on the day that it could have been done, or otherwise a backlog is perceived.

Quoting the old truism, "Justice delayed is justice denied," Ms. Kentner indicates her court places a high premium on prompt case processing. "When stuff starts to get delayed, it snowballs," creating extra work, she says. "Keeping things done timely is good practice."

To avoid backlogs, the court responds by either moving staff or moving workload so that all resources can be used efficiently.

The award by the chief justice also highlighted the San Bernardino court's automated records management system, which also is the subject of the court's 2005 Ralph N. Kleps Award for Improvement in Administration of the Courts. It focuses on computer accessibility of more than three million archive files stored in a central facility in San Bernardino. It is the second Kleps award honoring the record center, where archive records can be transferred into electronic format and where systematic statute-based destruction of archaic records is undertaken. The facility stores court reporter notes as well as inactive case files.

Her award from the chief justice also focuses on Ms. Kentner's many leadership activities in the state court system. Recently named to a new statewide task force on handling domestic violence cases, she has served two three-year terms as an advisory member of the state Judicial Council, has served on the council's executive and planning committee and litigation management committee, and has chaired the court executive advisory committee. Among many organizational involvements, she has served as president of the California Association for Trial Court Administration.

In addition to unification of the San Bernardino Municipal and Superior courts, under Ms. Kentner's leadership the local court set up its own personnel system apart from the county human resources department. She says this change has allowed the court to exercise more control over human resources issues, design job roles best suited to the court, negotiate labor agreements on its own, and recruit locally to meet more efficiently the staffing needs of this big county's far flung courthouses. ▶



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