

# ...CHIEF JUDGE CHERYL LOHMEYER .....

## Giving a Voice and a Helping Hand to Those in Need Has Shaped Judge Lohmeyer's Legal Career

"Victories come in all different varieties in probate and family court."

As the Chief Judge of Monroe County Probate Court, Judge Cheryl Lohmeyer has learned to appreciate each victory, big and small.

She admits that the most rewarding part of working in probate court is also the most difficult: handling juvenile guardianship cases and child protective proceedings.

"It is rewarding to craft plans for the parents to address their issues, and it is especially rewarding when the plans are followed and parents find housing, employment, or the treatment and counseling they need," she shared. "But when parents fail in their plans, fail to visit their children consistently, or even abandon their children, it is heartbreaking. Children deserve stability, permanent homes, support, and love."

From her time in the county prosecutor's office to private practice to presiding over probate court cases, Chief Judge Lohmeyer has dedicated her career to probate and family court cases. As an assistant prosecuting attorney, she advocated for the rights of victims and prosecuted petitions for child abuse, neglect, and juvenile delinquency. She also led a multidisciplinary team of social workers, law enforcement, and counselors at the Monroe County Child Advocacy Center in the process of forensic interviewing of children and the investigation of child abuse.



*Chief Judge Lohmeyer*

Noted Chief Judge Lohmeyer, "These matters deal with the everyday difficulties of families and require careful problem solving. For example, some probate matters involve securing treatment for the mentally ill who are at a risk of harm to themselves or others. Thus, after ordering treatment, I get to see their well-being restored."

And other probate matters require even more careful problem solving. She recalls a case about "Sue," who used heroin, abused prescription drugs, was unemployed, and led a generally unhealthy lifestyle. She had at least two criminal charges pending against her, and had been forbidden unsupervised contact with any of her three children, including her third -- a newborn. According to Chief Judge Lohmeyer, the circumstances of the case "did not suggest that change and rehabilitation would be easy."



But after 11 months, change is just what Sue did. She made it through rehab, implemented a healthier lifestyle, and found steady employment. As Sue changed, the court’s trust in her grew, until she earned unsupervised visits that grew to overnight visits.

“It took an enormous amount of work on her part, but Sue completed her requirements and turned her life around,” shared Chief Judge Lohmeyer. “Sue told me that her probation officer wanted her to talk to other women about overcoming addiction. I remarked that she is a role model now. She started to cry; I don’t think she even realized it.”

While Sue’s turnaround is a victory, her story is by no means an unusual circumstance in probate court. As the opioid epidemic continues to ravage the entire state—and country—Chief Judge Lohmeyer notes a particular consequence that many do not fully realize: the foster care system is being overwhelmed with children of those who have been engulfed by this epidemic.

“I believe that collaboration between the court and other stakeholders is critical to addressing this issue and the safety and long-term well-being of kids,” she remarked.

To that end, she created Monroe’s Child Welfare and Stability Work Group, a multi-disciplinary coalition of jurists, attorneys, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff and leadership, Friend of the Court, and Probate Register. With a mission of achieving stability for children, these stakeholders are

collectively developing local best practices for youth in out-of-home placement and addressing the proper application of Estates & Protected Individuals Code limited and full guardianships, third-party custody actions, juvenile guardianships, adoptions, and child protective proceedings.

“Being witness to juveniles righting their wrongs through restorative justice programs, parents who overcome addictions, and children blooming in the care of loving foster parents is a privilege,” she continued. “Helping to problem-solve and being a part of these human stories remind me there is no court where I would rather be.”



*On Adoption Day 2017, Chief Judge Lohmeyer gives a newly-adopted child the moment of a lifetime: banging the gavel in court!*

In addition to her judicial duties and community-based collaborations, Chief Judge Lohmeyer also serves on the Governor’s Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, and was appointed to chair the Law and Policy Committee. The Committee is charged with making recommendations

to the Task Force regarding the reform of laws and DHHS policies with the goal of helping to protect children from physical and sexual abuse and exploitation.

“During my time on the Task Force, I hope to see our efforts to increase the number of foster homes be successful. Every child who has been subjected to abuse or neglect deserves a safe and loving home,” remarked Chief Judge Lohmeyer. “I also would like to ensure that training on the signs of child abuse and neglect becomes more widely available. Children need as many watchful eyes and helping hands as possible.”