

# ...CHIEF JUDGE MONTE BURMEISTER .....

## For Judge Burmeister, Serving in the ‘Original People’s Court’ Is Its Own Reward

“You saved me.”

A young lady approached Crawford County Probate Court Chief Judge Monte Burmeister in public once and said that to him. When he responded initially with a perplexed look, she reminded him of her name and then he remembered: he had handled her abuse and neglect case in court.

She continued, “You took me out of that house. Thank you.”

For someone who didn’t remotely plan to become a judge originally, this kind of occurrence is what keeps Chief Judge Burmeister passionate about and dedicated to his role on the bench.

Chief Judge Burmeister credits former Michigan Supreme Court Justice and Court of Appeals Judge Alton T. Davis with his decision to run for election in 2006 in the first place.

“I would not be a judge were it not for Justice Davis’s encouragement,” he remarked. “It was the furthest thing on my mind, not even on my radar.”

Chief Judge Burmeister had a thriving litigation solo law practice at the time and Justice Davis was then a judge in the 46th Circuit Court.

“He asked me if I had ever thought about being a judge. I was surprised by the question and said that I hadn’t,” Chief Judge Burmeister shared. “He then told me I should.”



*Chief Judge Burmeister*

Years after that election, Chief Judge Burmeister not only oversees the probate court, but he also serves as Chief Judge of the 87C District Court and Presiding Judge of the 46th Circuit Court Family Division.

Chief Judge Burmeister’s main probate court focus is guardianships. “The most rewarding aspect of probate court, in particular, is that it’s the original ‘People’s Court,’” remarked Chief Judge Burmeister. “You have an opportunity often to protect the vulnerable and to help families.”

On the flip side, he admits that the most difficult aspect of working in probate court is trying to fashion a remedy for someone in need, when the agency involved with that individual has a set of protocols, policies, or procedures that are “not conducive to



the mission at hand.”

Chief Judge Burmeister recalls one case in particular that stands out during his tenure on the bench: “Like many probate judges, I handle abuse and neglect cases. I had a case where there were five children being chronically, physically abused by their parents. When child protective services began investigating, the mother told each child she would kill them if they told CPS the truth about what was happening.

“Whether the threat was real or not, the children perceived it as real; they lived in constant fear. I removed the children from the home and stopped contact between the parents and children entirely until I could have a psychologist assess the children’s mental well-being.”

He continued, “The psychologist ultimately said the level of abuse they had encountered was so severe that contact with the parents in any form would be further traumatizing to them. Eventually, the parents voluntarily relinquished their parental rights.”

And that young woman who thanked Chief Judge Burmeister years later for saving her? She was one of the children he removed from that house.

In addition to his judicial duties, Chief Judge Burmeister is also dedicated to addressing judicial

ethics and standards of conduct in the profession.

And key words from Justice Davis have continued to guide him in this capacity over the years.

“One of things he said, which I try to remember all the time, is, ‘There is a tendency when you become

a judge to walk into the room and be the 800-pound gorilla. Don’t do it. Try to work with people instead of throwing your weight around. Use of the authority the public has invested in you should be exercised wisely and with discretion,’” shared Chief Judge Burmeister.

He was elected as a Commissioner to serve on the Judicial Tenure Commission—currently starting his sixth year—and serves as its Vice Chairperson.

He also has presented as a faculty member on the subject of judicial ethics for the Michigan Judicial Institute under the State Court Administrative Office.

“My general philosophy is that the commission should serve—not just in an investigative, prosecutorial, and adjudicatory role—but before we get to those roles, we should also serve an educational role for judges,” he explained. “I am a big proponent of giving judges educational tools and highlighting areas of concern to help them avoid those scenarios that could potentially be a pitfall.”



*Chief Judge Burmeister on Adoption Day 2017 at the Michigan Hall of Justice in Lansing, where he introduced 2017 Daniel Wright Award recipient retired Wexford County Probate Judge Kenneth Tacoma. (See feature on p. 19.)*