

CHIEF JUDGE ROBERT COLOMBO, JR.

How the 'Spirit of Detroit' Has Guided Chief Judge Colombo through 35+ Years on the Bench

It's a pretty safe bet that Chief Judge Robert Colombo, Jr., of Wayne County Circuit Court, never envisioned an appearance on a television show as part of his career path. But after more than 40 years working in the legal profession, he can count an appearance in a Netflix original series as one of his many accomplishments.

Chief Judge Colombo first got his start as a law clerk for Judge George Bashara, Jr., in the Michigan Court of Appeals before joining the small law firm Riley and Roumell in 1977. During his time working as a trial and appellate attorney, he says the opportunities he had to work on criminal felony cases and civil cases helped hone his skills in becoming a better attorney. His time there was the main motivation in his decision to become a judge.

"I really liked the legal part of the business, but I didn't like the business part of being a lawyer," he shared. This led him to discuss a judicial run with his father, the late Judge Robert Colombo, Sr., who was a longtime judge in the Detroit Recorder's Court and Wayne County Circuit Court.

In addition, his father-in-law, the late Wayne County Circuit Court Chief Judge Joseph A. Sullivan, also gave him advice on how to conduct himself once he became a judge. "You should never lose your temper, because judges hold all the cards," was just one key bit of advice he remembers receiving.



Chief Judge Colombo

Once he was elected to circuit court in 1983, Judge Colombo began his judicial career. For 25 years he handled all asbestos litigation in Wayne County.

In the mid 1990s he managed and tried Dow Corning's breast implant insurance coverage case, in which the Court of Appeals noted "the remarkable skill and patience exhibited by Judge Colombo in the face of some of the most expansive and complex litigation in the history of the state."

One of the most famous cases of his career and in Wayne County, however, was *People v. Lawrence DeLisle*, a case that would go on to have its own episode in the Netflix Original series "Confession Tapes," in which a young Judge Colombo makes an appearance.



He also presided over the *Detroit Free Press* Freedom of Information Act lawsuit that led to the release of the secret settlement agreement in the whistleblower's lawsuit brought by Gary Brown against the City of Detroit and then-Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. Text messages revealed Kilpatrick and his chief of staff had committed perjury in the whistleblower's action.

With his success on the bench, Judge Colombo was appointed Chief Judge in 2014, succeeding the former Chief Judge Virgil Smith. With his new leadership role also came new challenges of running the largest court in the state.

"There are 58 judges, 25 referees, 600 employees; it is the biggest court in Michigan, and it's one of the biggest in the United States," he explained. "When you're managing the largest court in the state, you have to make certain that it operates properly."

On the subject of handling the everyday issues, he credits his team and their "constant communication" for making sure everything is working as it should.

With a strong support team behind him, Judge Colombo is able to focus on some of his goals as Chief Judge, which includes streamlining jury management, reinstating the release of an annual report from the court, and implementing a five-year strategic plan that he hopes will continue after he retires.

One of his proudest accomplishments is his reinstatement of the Law Day program, through which 300 Detroit high school students visit the Wayne County Circuit Court to hear from keynote speakers and participate in a mock trial program. Through his efforts in bringing this opportunity to Wayne County, Chief Judge Colombo was honored with the Spirit of Detroit Award by the Detroit City Council.

On receiving the award, he noted, "It tells me that the Detroit City Council is aware I'm trying to make a difference by educating young people on what the court is about, what opportunities there are to work in the court, and what their legal rights are. This is a great honor that they bestowed on me, and I'm so appreciative."

Judge Colombo also recognizes the importance of being active in his community. Some of the events he says he feels are the most beneficial are free child support clinics that the Friend of the Court regularly coordinates at the public library, educational speaking opportunities, and specialty treatment court graduations.

So why is it important that he and his court are involved in the community? "It's important to educate citizens, so that they understand the role of the court system and their rights," said Chief Judge Colombo. "A lot of people are afraid to address issues, like child support, because they're scared they're going to be arrested," he continued. "A lot of it is educational, to



(l to r) Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Patricia Fresard, Chief Judge Colombo, and Court Administrator Zenell Brown attending SCAO alternate dispute resolution training at the Michigan Hall of Justice in Lansing.

try to get people to understand how we operate, to not be afraid of us. Take away the fear and educate people on what they can do to protect their rights.”

During his time on the bench, he has received many awards for his service, including the Earl J. Cline Award for Excellence from the Negligence Bar Section of the State Bar of Michigan, the Judge of the Year award from the Michigan Defense Trial Counsel, and the Justinian Award from the Italian American Bar Association of Michigan. In November the Detroit Bar Association will honor Judge Colombo with the Dennis W. Archer Award. “Chief Judge Colombo is a judge of uncommon courage and integrity who is not shy to question a policy,” said State Court Administrator and former Wayne County Probate Judge Milton Mack, Jr., a longtime colleague and friend. “He always delivers the unvarnished truth.”

As he prepares for retirement, Chief Judge Colombo says just “being a good judge” is what he wants people to remember about him.



(l to r) Chief Judge Colombo celebrates Wayne County Reunification Day 2018 with Family-Juvenile Division Presiding Judge Virgil Smith, whom Judge Colombo succeeded as Chief Judge of Wayne County Circuit Court.

“I’ve always tried to be a really good circuit court judge and put the work into making the right decision,” he shared. “I hope I’m remembered for just being a good judge, and the work that I’ve done in this court.”



(l to r) Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, Wayne County Circuit Court intern Qortez Brown, and Chief Judge Colombo.

