

KENT COUNTY CIRCUIT COURT JUDGE CHRISTOPHER YATES

For Judge Yates, making a difference from the bench is ‘business as usual’

One might call Kent County Judge Christopher P. Yates an over-achiever.

After finishing his undergraduate studies at Kalamazoo College, he took an unconventional route, and earned both his M.B.A. and law degree in just four years from the University of Illinois at Champaign.

Fresh out of law school, Judge Yates started clerking for Chief Judge James Churchill of the U.S. District Court, and then for U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Ralph Guy.

“Judge Churchill and Judge Guy are two giants in the law. They became my role models, and I have tried to emulate them in every way. I always knew that if I ever had the chance to serve as a judge, I would be as much like them as I could,” he explained. “They have been shining examples of what a judge should be.”

After completing his judicial clerkships, Judge Yates moved to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Michigan, where Stephen J. Markman - the current MSC Chief Justice - hired him, and Alan Gershel oversaw his work on criminal cases.

Not a bad list of references to start a resume....

“I’ve been very fortunate. The first 10 years of my career could not have been a better instruction on how to be a good lawyer, and eventually to be a good judge,” said Judge Yates. A “good judge”



Judge Christopher Yates

indeed, Judge Yates was handpicked to run Michigan’s first specialty business docket pilot program in Kent County.

“We were able to be pretty innovative at the pilot stage and were given a great deal of latitude by the Supreme Court and the State Court Administrative Office,” he explained.

“We developed a model that I thought fit perfectly with what I had seen work in major commercial litigation in federal court.”

About ten months after the Kent County pilot started, Michigan enacted a statute that required all courts with at least three circuit judges to implement a specialized business docket.



"I was lucky enough to get to work on shaping the legislation that created the business courts," Judge Yates recalled. "I give the Legislature and the governor a lot of credit for inviting input from those of us who were handling business dockets, and the end result, I think, incorporated all of the best practices."

Business courts handle commercial cases that are typically more complex and time-consuming than other civil, criminal, or family cases.

"These courts are beneficial to both the bench and the bar, but more importantly, to the business community. Judges used to have general criminal/civil dockets, where the large commercial cases would languish because there were all these other cases that you have to prioritize as a judge — you have to give your criminal cases, particularly with people in custody, first priority," he remarked. "You didn't have the time to devote to handling discovery disputes, meeting with the attorneys, and making sure that the big commercial cases were moving along smoothly."

But by pulling those cases out of the general civil/criminal docket, they are now assigned to judges who have specialized experience and see those sorts of issues all the time, such as Judge Yates. Business court judges can devote the necessary time and resources to the cases, and give the

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"In Kent County, I can tell you that all of us on the bench have found the business docket to be helpful. My colleagues are grateful that I'm handling the bigger, more complicated cases, and I'm pleased that I don't have to worry about other cases—that I can devote my full attention to the complex business cases."

As a judicial clerk, Judge Yates first learned the law in a judging sense, as a formal discipline that required analysis without regard to personal beliefs.

"I feel like I'm intellectually coming home again because I started out trying to be as solid analytically as I could as a law clerk, and now I'm back trying to be as solid analytically as I can as a judge."

Judge Yates revels in his position.

"Every day, I come to work and I feel like my efforts make a difference."

Judge Yates has been happily married for 13 years to East Grand Rapids high school teacher Janice Yates, who is a high achiever in her own right, as she was named both the Michigan and national history teacher of the year in 2016. They have four daughters and live in the Grand Rapids area. 🏡