

## Judicial Profile: Judge Connors upholds the law and focuses on healing the community through peacemaking court

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For Washtenaw County Circuit Judge Timothy P. Connors, keeping the peace is about more than just ruling on the docket before him; it's about healing the community, one case at a time.

Judge Connors recalls a pivotal piece of advice given to him by his mentor and predecessor, Washtenaw County Judge George Alexander, when he was appointed to the 15th District Court in 1991: "He said, 'Remember that as attorneys and judges, our obligation is to be healers of controversy. Always guide yourself that way.'"

"I realized early on how prophetic this was," Judge Connors shared. "For me, it was always about going in and winning the case, but then I realized that what we do has a far greater ripple effect."

Judge Connors has had keen eyes for this ripple effect, and has set out to bring about positive outcomes and relationships throughout his years on the bench.

When the peacemaking court concept was funded by the Supreme Court through a Court Performance Innovation Fund grant in 2013, he took on the new challenge with open arms.

Why? Judge Connors simply replied, "Because it works."

Peacemaking is a traditional Native American approach to justice that focuses on healing and restoration rather than punishment. What makes the peacemaking court different than other courts is the emphasis on institutional responsibility to heal controversy.



*Judge Timothy Connors*



*Judge Connors with MSC Justice Bridget M. McCormack, at a Tribal State Federal Judicial Forum*

“This is accomplished through the affirmation of positive human values and relationships,” Judge Connors explained. “That responsibility exists before, during, and after our jurisdictional requirements have been fulfilled.”

In Washtenaw County, Judge Connors has seen cases involving vulnerable people with disabilities, elder care issues, probate estate distributions (heirs, inheritance, guardianship), civil litigation), and especially cases out of family court. He explains that most of the time in family court, there is some type of ongoing relationship between the parties after the case. That is why it makes sense to put many of these cases on the peacemaking docket, he says.

Peacemaking courts across the country are typically found within tribal courts. For the 567 different tribes across the country, peacemaking courts have become the norm. Judge Connors says that more state courts are looking at this as a viable, concurrent path, and that Michigan is leading the efforts.

“There are 15 tribal state federal forums in the country. Of those, four are considered leaders in terms of their innovation, collaboration and communication, and vision. The four that are considered leaders are California, Arizona, New Mexico and Michigan,” he said.

Judge Connors is also co-chair of the Michigan Tribal State Federal Judicial Forum, which was established to address common issues in these court systems and to continue Michigan’s long history of collaboration between state and tribal courts.

In addition, he is working to bring more awareness about the benefits of peacemaking court by encouraging Michigan law schools to adopt curricula on the topic. To date, the University of Michigan and Wayne State University, where he teaches, have already adopted such a curriculum. Nationally, schools such as Columbia University, Yale University, the University of New Mexico, and the University of Washington have incorporated a peacemaking curriculum.

What’s next for Washtenaw Peacemaking Court and Judge Connors?

“We put a lot of energy into the reunification docket for families who are struggling,” he explained. “We are now putting together a peacemaking court in domestic relations, so we’re working on a very systemic approach that will launch next year.”

Judge Connors received his undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan and law degree from Wayne State University. He has been married to his wife, a retired assistant prosecutor, who currently teaches with her husband, for 21 years. They have four children and four grandchildren and live in Ann Arbor.

On wearing the many hats that he wears—jurist, peacemaker, educator, volunteer, family man—Judge Connors said, “As long as the Creator is giving me two legs to move upon, I am going to keep walking as much as I can.”