

Judge Sara Smolenski: The Quality of Care—and of Caring

Recalling the time she wanted to help a 4th-grade classmate overcome his fear of reading aloud, Judge Sara Smolenski has always cared about helping others.

This desire to help improve the lives of others around her also led to her decision to become an attorney—she says she wanted to speak for others who could not speak for themselves.

Elected in 1990 to the 63rd District Court in Grand Rapids and appointed Chief Judge six years later, Judge Smolenski has continued helping people beyond the bench by lending her support to numerous charitable organizations and efforts in West Michigan over the years.

Being a part of Hospice of Michigan (HOM), in particular, is very near and dear to her. “Both of my parents were helped by Hospice of Michigan at the end of their lives, and I was very impressed by their care and concern,” she shared.

She was asked to be a board member after that experience, which happened 10 years ago, and she is a past chairperson of the HOM Foundation Board. On why she became involved, Judge Smolenski simply said, “It’s the right thing to do.”

Founded in 1979, Hospice of Michigan never turns anyone away—one of the things that appealed to Judge Smolenski. It has the only statewide dedicated pediatric hospice and support program, and offers expert medical care, plus emotional and spiritual support for the entire family.

Another organization that is important to Judge Smolenski is the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, with which she has been involved for the last 15-plus years, including as a speaker at the Foundation’s annual dinner.

“We need to help eliminate the stigma around mental health illnesses, and we need to proactively normalize the need for mental health treatment,” remarked Judge Smolenski. “The Mental Health Foundation works toward that, and is vital in providing assistance to people in our community with mental health issues.”

When it comes to volunteering in the community, Judge Smolenski believes that it is incumbent upon judges to lead the way. “Judges have a unique opportunity to set an example that giving back helps everyone,” she said. “It helps make our community stronger.”

And not only does Judge Smolenski talk the talk on that note, but she also walks the walk. She regularly hosts school groups at the court to help educate students about the judicial branch and to give them a firsthand look into the court system. She also gets out of the courtroom frequently to speak at community events, educational programs, charitable drives, and civic and community groups. Among the many local organizations she has supported are the

American Cancer Society, Kids Food Basket, YWCA, Michigan Women's Foundation, and Senior Neighbors.

And her main message when she speaks to these groups? "Every person can contribute to helping others."