

## **A Life at the Court: Reminiscences of the Court of Appeal's First Days**

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I was a senior in high school in the early 1960's when I first started working for the law firm of Lesinski & Paruk. The principals of the firm were T. John Lesinski, a Michigan state representative and later Lieutenant Governor, and municipal court Judge Walter A. Paruk. I was interviewed and hired by Judge Paruk, so it wasn't until a few days after I started work that I first met Mr. Lesinski. His first comment upon meeting me was "I hope you don't intend to come to work looking like that!" I had on a dress, sneakers and sweat socks.

I worked for the law firm while going to college. In 1964 I was ready to graduate with a degree in psychology. This coincided with the establishment of the Court of Appeals and Judge Lesinski's election to the Court. In anticipation of my graduation, I lined up a job as a social worker with a state agency. When I informed my employers I would be leaving, Judge Lesinski convinced me to stay with him and become an employee of the new Court of Appeals. He told me that it would be a unique and exciting opportunity, and that I would part of making Michigan history. Judge Lesinski wasn't an easy person to say "no" to, so I agreed to postpone my social work career. But, I told him that I would only stay for one year. I missed the mark by a few years, eventually outlasting all the original Judges and staff, retiring from the Court in 2009 after over 40 years.

I remember being nervous and excited coming to work at the Court those first days. Our office was in the Washington Boulevard Building. A strict dress code was in effect, dresses or suits for women, with nylons and heels. This was particularly hard to endure because the offices were initially furnished with surplus prison furniture and every day a pair of nylons was ruined! In the first few months we often were not terribly busy. It got to the point where future Chief Clerk Ella Williams and I used to argue about who got to docket new pleadings.

At the time, it seemed like everything that came out of the Court was big news. If there was an emergency appeal, the reporters would be in the office waiting for a copy of the order. Everything was typed using carbon paper for copies. You often had to generate an original and six copies of an order with a Judge dictating the contents of the order while all these people were staring at you. All you could do was pray that you didn't make a mistake or that the Judge would not change his mind about what he just dictated.

Chief Judge Lesinski and Chief Clerk Ronald L. Dzierbicki were a brilliant team and easily up to the task of getting the Court off on the right foot. T. John Lesinski was a force to be reckoned with. He was a brilliant administrator and set very high standards for the Court. Judge Lesinski was very loyal to the Court employees, but never hesitated to call anyone out for mistakes made. One story I like to tell about Judge Lesinski exemplifies his larger-than-life personality.

Chief Judge Lesinski was standing nearby when I was on the phone with an attorney who was irate after being told he was required to arrive for oral argument by 10:00 a.m. He yelled that it was ridiculous that he be made to wait around from 10:00 a.m. until his case was called and then he hung up on me. Judge Lesinski overheard the conversation and immediately picked up my phone and called the attorney back. After identifying himself, Judge Lesinski loudly told the attorney that he was expected to treat Court employees with respect and, if there was a problem, the attorney should call him rather than berate Court staff. The Judge barked, "I'll see you at 10 a .m. in the courtroom!" and then slammed the phone down.

Chief Clerk Ronald Dzierbicki was also a force to be reckoned with and equally brilliant. We were given lessons on the court rules each day because it was understood we could never say "I don't know" to a question. Each district office had a Deputy Clerk and Assistant Deputy Clerk. In Detroit, where I worked, they were Steve Dallas and Otto Silvers. The register of actions for the cases were kept on docket cards which were locked in the "docket tub" each night. We had to learn to abbreviate entries on the docket cards, which could be quite a challenge at times, and mistakes were frowned upon. The docket tub was the heart of the office and we spent a lot of time making sure the docket cards were in pristine condition and filed correctly. I went through many bottles of white out!

I left for the Peace Corps in 1967 and came back in 1971, by then the Court had moved and expanded. It also had better furniture, purchased from Stowe Davis in Grand Rapids because Chief Judge Lesinski insisted that the Court purchase from a Michigan manufacturer. I'm surprised there wasn't an outcry about the cost, but I know when I left the Court 40 years later, my retirement party was held around a large, beautiful conference table purchased then and still in regular use.

I believe the Court's strong foundation came primarily from the leadership and vision of the Lesinski/Dzierbicki collaboration. The Court evolved through the years, technologically and in many other ways, but the foundation laid by Chief Judge Lesinski and Chief Clerk Dzierbicki remains to this day.

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