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Supreme Court Justice Sharon Kennedy

Serves the Community by Changing One Mind at a Time

By Wendy Beckman

Judge Sharon L. Kennedy has dedicated much of her career to the well-being of families and children.

Kennedy was sworn in for her third term as Judge of the Butler County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division, in 2010. Kennedy served as Administrative Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division since 2005. She was in private practice for several years, served as a magistrate and warrant officer in Butler County and as a warrant and compliance officer for Butler County's juvenile court, and worked as special counsel to Ohio Attorney General Betty Montgomery. She also served as a police officer in the City of Hamilton. In November 2012, she was elected to the Ohio Supreme Court.



In 2013, the Cincinnati Enquirer named Justice Kennedy a “woman to watch” because she is the first Butler County resident in 150 years to hold a seat on the Ohio Supreme Court. Not only that, she is the only justice from the Greater Cincinnati area and the first from Southwest Ohio since 1994.

Kennedy’s decision to focus on children and families was based on what she perceived as a need in the community from her experience on many sides of the judicial system. “My undergraduate degree from the University of Cincinnati is in social work and I interned at the Hamilton County Juvenile Court,” she says.

While at the Hamilton County Juvenile Court, she saw the inevitable progression of juveniles through

truancy-level offenses as they became indoctrinated into the court system. She says, “It introduced me to the Bob Hope House, which was a halfway house for young males who ended up there for a variety of reasons through the juvenile court.”

The Bob Hope House, founded in 1962 by the late Hamilton County Juvenile Court Judge Benjamin Schwartz, was a group home for delinquent, abandoned or otherwise “troubled” boys. Judge Schwartz appealed personally to entertainer Bob Hope who gave his name, his fundraising power, his time, and his money to the home. The Bob Hope House also provided a sort of halfway house to help youth reintegrate into society.

Coupled with being a police officer, Kennedy became acquainted with youth who had a long history of juvenile delinquency, who often turned into adult offenders.

Then Juvenile Court Administrator Rob Clevenger said something that gave Kennedy something to ponder. "Most people think, 'What happened with this child?' instead of 'Why not this child?'" she says.

"There was a family in Butler County that had four children," Kennedy says. "Three went to prison, but the fourth didn't." So what made the difference?

"That fourth child had a teacher and a coach who took a daily interest in him," says Kennedy. "You open a door, and it opens another one." She says that practicing law in the criminal and juvenile courts was a lot like that for her. "You're opening doors. It was an eye-opening experience."

"I looked at the world differently as a police officer. I certainly looked at it differently as a lawyer, and definitely now as a judge."

Making the Decision to Become a Lawyer

Kennedy ultimately decided to become a lawyer while she was a police officer. She notes that lawyers often come from privileged families. Looking at herself, she felt that her choices were limited. "My parents were people of working class," she says.

"But then it goes back again to 'change your mind, change your life.' For me, the seed was planted when I was a senior in high school; one teacher, Mr. Schering, told me that I shouldn't limit my possibilities. He said that I could be a lawyer — I could be a judge," Kennedy says.

"I laughed at him."

After earning her bachelor's degree from the University of Cincinnati's School of Social Work in 1984, she earned her JD from UC's College of Law in 1991.

"I loved the Law library: I loved the stacks. And the library staff were always incredibly helpful," Kennedy says. "Professor Murphy in contract law was very enthusiastic. He taught us a part of the law that none of us had ever entered into. In fact, he used to come over to Uncle Woody's to talk to us about law. He was a great, great man."

When she was clerking for a judge, she thought she might like to be a judge. He told her, "Kid, you're young — you could make it all the way."

She said, "Judge Crehan? Me?" to which he replied, "You could — don't limit your options."

Kennedy doesn't take her path for granted. Her parents encouraged her that she could be anything she

wanted to be. They told her if she committed herself to it and worked toward it every day, the American Dream was hers to achieve.

"I still think sometimes 'Man! I'm a judge!'" she says. "Or when I'm walking into the Ohio Supreme Court Building I almost have to pinch myself — 'Wow! I am a justice of the Ohio Supreme Court.'"

She points out that when she was studying at the College of Law, because of her background as a police officer, she especially loved Professor Aplin and his criminal law classes.

"The skills they taught never leave you. You never walk away from



it” she says. “I can argue everything, whether I agree or not. Law school made everything grey.”

She adds, “I looked at the world differently as a police officer. I certainly looked at it differently as a lawyer, and definitely now as a judge.”

Having worked in policing in real time, for example regarding search and seizure, as a police officer,



Kennedy says, “You’ve made the decision that you’re going home alive. OK, suppose I found a gun but lost the case. I felt I had probable cause to search. A judge has time to sit and make that decision. In the real world, the officer has to make that decision in a heartbeat.”

“I think you never stop serving. It’s part of your responsibility.”

Kennedy points out that in her roles as an officer and as a lawyer she’s seen cases that seemed clear cut before they went to trial, then didn’t go as expected. “It can be disappointing,” she says. “Then it comes down to a question of ‘Do you believe in the constitution?’”

Connecting through Community Service

Both as a police officer and as a lawyer, Kennedy has enjoyed the community service aspects of her job.

“A major aspect of police work is to provide a type of crisis intervention service, whether it’s a car crash or a crime in progress: you’re going to make a decision on the spot,” she explains. “As a lawyer, you get to sit back, give advice, present their case, and argue for them.”

Kennedy’s lawyer and police friends tease her that when she became a criminal defense attorney she went over to the “dark side,” she says. “But being a police officer made me a better criminal defense attorney. It made me ask, ‘Why did they do what they did?’”

As a judge, Kennedy says that she viewed her decisions in granting divorces like those of an umpire calling balls and strikes. “In half the cases, the husband probably disliked me, and in half the cases the wife probably disliked me. But I made the best decision I could, based on the evidence presented, with an understanding that a new family was created going forward after the divorce.”

Kennedy spends a lot of her spare time speaking to groups of

young girls as part of her program focusing on “change your mind, change your life.” In the Compass Program, where the girls have told Kennedy that they have never seen a judge except in a courtroom before, she makes a point to meet them on their level.

She talks to the girls the same way her parents talked to her about achieving the American Dream. She shows the girls how to figure out what they want to achieve, write down both short-term tasks and long-term objectives, and then do something every day to move in the direction of their dreams. She then affirms the girls’ belief in themselves and ability to overcome stumbling blocks to achieving their dreams, even in the face of setbacks and those people who do not believe they can.

“But they have to commit to it, by putting it down on paper,” she says.

Kennedy is clearly committed to helping the young people in the community and as her ongoing community service.

“I think you never stop serving,” she says. “It’s part of your responsibility.”