

# The Changing Face of the Jefferson Parish Judiciary

By William C. Credo III

To even the casual observer, the face of the Jefferson Parish judiciary is changing, inside and out.

After housing all the divisions of court during a two-year renovation period, the old courthouse has been demolished and the former courthouse annex has been renovated and included in a complex with the government services building and the district attorney's building. In close proximity are the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal building and a new courthouse for the 2nd Parish Court of Jefferson Parish. A juvenile justice complex in Gretna and a 1st Parish Court building in Metairie also serve the people of Jefferson Parish.

In the fall 2008 elections, four district judges retired and were replaced with four new judges, two unopposed and two elected. History will record that the first two female judges elected in Jefferson Parish, Judge Jo Ellen Grant and Judge Martha E. Sassone, both leave the bench together. A 5th Circuit appeals court judge has moved on to begin service on the Louisiana Supreme Court and a new black sub-district points to the pending election of the first African-American to the 5th Circuit bench.

In its journey to reflect the face of Jefferson Parish and its people, the face of the Jefferson judiciary has reflected diversity in race and gender.

With the passage of the 1921 Louisiana Constitution, Jefferson Parish became part of the 24th Judicial District Court when the state district court system was reorganized. The first judicial elections were held in 1924. The terms of the district judges and district attorney were expanded from four to six years, which remains in effect today.

Circuit riding through the parishes of Jefferson, St Charles and St John the Baptist until 1954, the 24th Judicial District judges developed a rugged individualism that persists to this day. That same year, the boundaries of Jefferson Parish were made the boundaries of jurisdiction of the 24th Judicial District Court.

Until the 1990s, all district judges were elected by a vote of the entire parish. Although all district court judges have full parish jurisdiction in civil and criminal matters through random allotment, they are now elected from judicial districts carved up from the election map.

## Juvenile Court

Judge Louis (L. Robert) Rivarde, Division A district judge from 1924-51, had a vision that children's needs must be addressed by the judges and the court when parents could not cope. He took on the duties of what would become a juvenile judge and now has a juvenile center named in his honor. His leadership spawned a juvenile court manned by Judge Leo W. McCune from 1959, the year it was established, until 1972. Judge Sol Gothard served from 1972-86 and was responsible for many innovative programs to deal with a rising juvenile delinquency rate. Judge Thomas P. McGee, who served from 1974-96, saw his dream of a juvenile justice complex become reality on Gretna Boulevard. In 1980, the face of the court changed with the election of its first female judge, Judge Nancy Amato Konrad, who serves today. She was joined in 1987 by Judge Ann Murray Keller and in 1996 by Judge Andrea Price Janzen. They are known as the "Court of Three Sisters" by the local bar.

## 1st Parish Court

On the parish's east bank, 1st Parish Court, Division A, was originally manned by Judge Cyril J. Gracianette, Sr., who served from 1964-84. Judge John B. (Bruce) Naccari served from 1985-95. Judge Rebecca M. Olivier has served since 1996.

Population growth led to the establishment of Division B. Judge Douglas Allen was the first judge to serve from 1971-76. Judge James Lockhart served from 1976-88. Judge George Giacobbe has served since 1988.

Criminal misdemeanor and traffic cases are heard in day and night sessions.

## 2nd Parish Court

To serve the needs of the parish's west bank, 2nd Parish Court, Division A, was established and led by its first Judge, Judge John J. Molaison Sr., who served from 1966-95. Judge Roy M. Cashio has served since 1995.

Population growth led to the establishment of Division B whose first judge was Judge Herbert Gautreaux, serving from 1979-90. Judge Calvin Hotard served from 1990-2000. Judge Stephen Grefer has served since 2001.

Criminal misdemeanor and traffic cases are heard in day and night sessions.

## 24th Judicial District Court

Division A, the oldest division, has the most judges in its service: Judge Prentice Edrington, Sr., 1920-24; Judge Louis Rivarde, 1924-51; Judge L. Julian Samuel, Sr., 1951-59; Judge Edward Stoulig, Jr., 1960-70; Judge Louis DeSonier, Jr., 1971-81;

Judge Roy Price, 1982-83; Judge G. Thomas Porteous, Jr., 1984 until his appointment as a federal judge in 1994; Judge Walter Rothschild, 1995 until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 2000; and Judge Joan Schilleci Bengé, 2001-present.

Judges in Division B have included Judge Leo McCune, 1944-60; Judge Frederick Heebe, 1960 until his appointment as a federal judge in 1966; Judge Frank Zaccaria, Sr., 1966-85; Judge Ernest V. Richards IV, 1986-96; Judge Fredericka Homberg (Ricky) Wicker, 1996 until her election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 2007; and Judge Cornelius (Conn) Regan currently serves in the division.

Judges in Division C have included Judge John Boutall, 1955-70; Judge Nestor Currault, Jr., 1971 until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1982; Judge Joseph Grefer, 1982-91 (his service as a drug court judge helped pave the way for the successful "ICAN" program); Judge Alan Green was elected from the new minority sub-district in 1992 and served until his resignation in 2005; and Judge June Darensberg is the current judge.

Division D was first led by Judge Robert Hughes, Sr., 1960-69; Judge Gordon Bynum, 1969-77; Judge Walter Kollin, 1978-96; and Judge Robert Murphy, 1996-present, he assumed a leadership position in the recently completed courthouse renovation.

Division E was established in 1964. Judge Frederick Bowes, its first judge, survived a courtroom gun incident when attorney Wiley Beevers managed to place his thumb in front of the hammer of a weapon grabbed by a defendant. He was elected to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1982. Judge Clarence McManus was elected without opposition in 1982 and served until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1999. Judge Greg Guidry was elected in 2000 and served until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 2006. Judge John J. Molaison, Jr. is the current judge.

Division F has seen only two judges: Judge Floyd Newlin, 1966-87; and Judge Patrick McCabe, Sr., 1987-present.

Division G's first judge was Judge H. Charles Gaudin, 1966 until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1982; Judge M. Joseph Tiemann, 1982-96; and Judge Robert Pitre has served since 1996.

Division H, established by the Legislature in 1972, has had four judges: Judge Thomas C. Wicker, 1972 until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1986; Judge Hubert Vondenstein, 1986-93; Judge Kernan (Skip) Hand, 1994-2008; and Judge Glen Ansardi began his service in 2009.

Division I, also established in 1972, had had three judges: Judge Wallace C. LeBrun, Sr., 1972-89; Judge Jo Ellen Grant, 1990-2008; and Judge Nancy Miller began her service in 2009.

Division J, established in 1975, had had four judges: Judge Patrick Carr, 1975 until his appointment as a federal judge in 1979; Judge Jacob Karno, 1979-96; Judge Sheldon G. Fernandez, 1996-2000; and Judge Stephen Windhorst, 2000-present.

Division K, also established in 1975, has had three judges: Judge Alvin (Rudy) Eason, 1975-90; Judge Martha Sassone, 1990-2008; and Judge Ellen Shirer Kovach who began her service in 2009.

Division L had the first African-American judge of the district, Judge Lionel R. Collins, elected in 1978 without opposition and served until his death in office in 1988. Judge Charles (Chuck) Cusimano II was elected in 1988 and served until his retirement in 2007. Judge Donald Rowan began his service in 2007.

Division M has had only two judges: Judge Robert J. Burns, 1978-96; and Judge Henry M. Sullivan, Jr., 1996-present.

Division N, established in 1981, has had four judges: Judge James L. Cannella, 1981 until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1991; Judge Susan M. Chehardy, 1992 until her election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1998; Judge Ronald D. Bodenheimer, 1999 until his resignation in 2002; and Judge Hans J. Liljeberg, 2002-present.

Division O, also established in 1981, has had three judges: Judge Ronald Loumiet, 1981-96; Judge Marion Edwards, 1996 until his election to the Louisiana 5th Circuit Court of Appeal in 1998; and Judge Ross P. LaDart, 1999-present.

Division P was established in 1990 but the election for that judgeship was delayed until 1992 by litigation. Judge Melvin Zeno was first elected in 1992 and served until his decision not to seek re-election in 2008. Judge Lee V. Faulkner was elected without opposition and began his service in 2009. History will record that he is the first African-American president of the Jefferson Bar Association to serve in that capacity. He is also the first judge to serve as president of the Jefferson Bar Association while serving as a sitting judge.

Throughout the judicial elections in Jefferson Parish, the exploration of differences, not just in status or political beliefs, has moved beyond simple tolerance to a celebration of those rich dimensions of diversity contained in every candidate who offers himself/herself for public service as a judge. Such a concept of diversity which encompasses acceptance and respect surely serves the bench and bar and the people who come before those tribunals.

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