

Attorneys Give Back By Being Judges

By THOM SENZEE
Contributing Reporter

San Fernando Valley attorneys are filling a need for more judges at courts throughout the region by volunteering their time and learning to leave their biases at the courtroom door.

"It's part of the budget crisis really," said San Fernando Valley Bar Association president elect Tamila Jensen. "Judges have been retiring, or leaving the bench for other reasons and haven't been replaced."

In exchange for their labor, attorneys participating in the Los Angeles Superior Court Temporary Judge Program are getting invaluable bench experience; a legal system, i.e., an industry, that is less vulnerable to gridlock; not to mention the satisfaction of giving back to the community.

But in order to become qualified to sit on the bench, attorneys study judgeship by taking courses online, then meeting for bias-elimination and bench-etiquette training under the tutelage of a sitting judge.

In addition, attorneys must pay for their training and work pro bono. However, the cost for the training is nominal, and it does count toward mandatory continuing-education credits.

The San Fernando Valley Bar Association is a critical link in facilitating the judge pro tem program at the Van Nuys Superior Court complex.

"Getting the word out is the main role of the local bar association," Jensen said. "There has always been a need by the court for this kind of help, but it's easier to meet that need now that they're offering the training here in the Valley."

In the past, lawyers have had to travel downtown for training. As a result, San Fernando Valley Bar Association leaders once had to work hard to persuade what sometimes turned out to be only a handful of attorneys to sign up for the job.

But at the first Valley-based training event, held recently in Van Nuys, 125 attorneys came to learn the finer points of jurisprudence.

Even with all the training they receive, pro tem judges are

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limited in what types of cases over which they may preside.

"It depends on the needs of the court," Jensen said. "But they are qualified to handle traffic cases, small claims, and unlawful-detainer cases."

Still, career judges say the contributions of pro tem judges are substantial.

"I think it's a tremendous asset to the court," said Judge Stuart Rice, chair of L.A. Superior Court's Temporary Judge Committee. "They get to sit in a judicial position and give back to the community by sitting in high-volume courts so cases get to be heard more judiciously and expeditiously."

According to Judge Rice, the Internet has both made training for temporary judges more efficient and allowed for a tougher curriculum.

"These attorneys have to receive a certain amount of training," he said. "And the recent changes have dramatically improved that training. Now it's much more rigorous, but almost all the courses may be taken online."

All, that is, but bench conduct and demeanor class, which includes some ethics training and the all-important bias-elimination course, an area of expertise Judge Rice focuses on when he serves as faculty.

"The main goal of the class is to get them thinking in a certain way," he said. "Just as our jurors sit in judgment without any formal training, we ask them to put aside their opinions by being sensitive to what biases they may have."

Judge Rice believes that, in addition to the obvious areas of potential prejudice, such as race, other possible biases must be recognized by lawyers-become-judges.

"What about somebody who has a tattoo above their left eyebrow," he said. "The training is about getting them to look at their own experiences with discrimination. I ask women attor-

neys to ask themselves if they've been treated a certain way that could have created bias."

Judge Rice points out that the leap from dedicated advocate to impartial jurist may not be so hard for attorneys who find themselves wearing a black robe for the first time.

"The minimum requirement is ten years of practice as an attorney," he said. "That means they've - hopefully - been aware of these issues and witnessed how judges work to eliminate bias at the bench."

Also, Judge Rice adds, every class includes some attorneys with previous judicial experience; two-thirds of the latest temporary-judge-training class attendees were renewing their qualifications.

"We've received huge amounts of feedback from our members saying that they're grateful that the training is now in Van Nuys and not just downtown, because they don't always have the time to go all the way downtown when the training is also several hours long," said San Fernando Valley Bar Association president Sue M. Bendavid.

But more than excitement about the new proximity of training to become a temporary judge, Bendavid says her organization's members are thrilled to have a chance to show that lawyers are like everyone else: they enjoy giving back to their community.

"There is no downside to this," she said. "I mean if you had to force yourself to find a downside, you could say, 'well, these attorneys are giving up billable hours.' But that's kind of the point, it is a bit of a sacrifice, and I think that's what makes the legal community feel good about borrowing a robe and sitting on the bench in a way that helps people."

Bendavid and Jensen say the bar association has a long history of cooperation with the court. In fact, the organization itself was formed in 1926 to raise money for the construction of a courthouse in the San Fernando Valley.