

ELLENSBURG DAILY RECORD

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Judge Thomas A. Haven retires after 20 years on bench

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer | 0 comments

ELLENSBURG - It wasn't quite fan mail, but it definitely wasn't hate mail.

Judge Thomas Haven recently received a letter from an inmate in the Kittitas County jail.

No, the inmate didn't say he was glad he had received a hefty jail sentence from Haven who serves on the Lower County District Court bench.

"He actually thanked me for my years of service as a judge," said Haven, 59, who will retire Jan. 7 after 20 years on the bench. "He thanked me for being fair and treating him with respect.

"In looking back on my years as a judge I find that particularly meaningful to me."

Haven's last day is Friday. Jim Hurson, the Lower Kittitas County District Court commissioner, was elected as the new Lower County District judge and will fill Haven's slot.

With a bit of light-hearted surprise in his voice, Haven said late last week he's been receiving cards, letters and even Christmas cards in the past few weeks from people who have come before him in court action of some kind over the years.

"They've heard I'm retiring, and they're wishing me the best," Haven said. "I'm even getting a few comments when court is in session. It's all been very touching."

After 20 years of keeping himself and his family, in his words, somewhat isolated from many aspects of the community because of his work as a judge, he's now looking forward to getting back in touch with the life of the community after retirement.

Haven believes the many positives of his years in the local law and justice system have greatly outweighed the negatives.

First legal job

Haven was hired by then county Prosecutor Joseph Panattoni in spring 1979 as a county deputy prosecutor. Haven received a journalism degree from the University of Oregon in 1975, and in 1978 graduated from the University of Puget Sound Law School with a law degree.

A few months later he passed the state bar exam and was licensed to practice law in Washington.

His first job in the law and justice system was in Kittitas County; he served as a deputy prosecutor for more than 12 years.

"The state was entering into a time of change with how it handled juvenile cases," Haven said.

Prosecutors became involved, and soon Haven was doing all of the juvenile cases, and later did all the cases where kids were involved - child support and situations where children were victims.

Haven said he held off for several years from running for the elected district court judge position believing he should have more experience.

But by 1990 he believed he had the needed experience to be a good judge.

With the help and encouragement of his wife, Sara, and close friends, Haven said he "took the plunge and ran for office."

"I thought I could do the job better than anyone else expressing an interest in running for district court judge," Haven said.

He won the judgeship, and also won re-election every four years after that.

In counting up the years, Haven said he's worked for the county nearly 32 years, 20 of those as district court judge.

Challenging

"The isolating aspect of being a judge is a challenge in your life," Haven said, referring to rules of ethics for judges to steer clear of possible conflicts of interest.

For example, if a judge becomes active in a local civic club or other community groups, "one day soon you'll have another member of that group you know coming before you in court," he said.

At that point he would have to take himself off the case, and another judge would have to deal with it.

"I didn't want to get into that situation, so I chose to withdraw from civic involvement, from volunteering and fundraisers. That seemed the easiest way to deal with it.

"Even if a certain activity outside the courtroom is allowed by the canons of ethics, it's just easier for me not to do it."

When doing everyday errands around town, Haven often meets people who have come before him in court, from dealing with a traffic infraction to assault, driving under the influence or domestic violence.

"Sometimes I see 200 to 300 people in one week," Haven said. "I usually don't remember them, unless it's a very memorable case, but it was probably a pretty big experience for the other person.

"They usually turn their heads and walk the other way when they see me."

Case in point: on Wednesday, the city of Ellensburg's municipal court day has 80 cases on the docket.

Once in a while defendants may ask him a question after meeting him in public, and he always refers them to contact the district court staff with the question.

Haven is hoping for a different, closer relationship with the community and its members once he takes off the judge's robes.

"While judges are certainly a vital part of the community, I'm looking forward to being just an ordinary citizen free to participate in many meaningful, less stressful community activities," Haven said.

Positives

Yet there are positives in Haven's legal work that have been a part of his daily court routine, and he said will be right up to his last day of work.

"There's a great satisfaction in having an opportunity to, hopefully, make a difference in the life of a defendant, and in the community," Haven said.

District court judges, he said, have more leeway in their sentencing procedures than in Superior Court, and he often closely considers the background of a defendant, along with any criminal history, before sentencing.

"There's much more room for discussion in district court with the defendant and the attorneys," Haven said. "In the end, I may give a defendant a break, as it were, an opportunity to become accountable through the court and probation to get their life in order and do the right thing."

In other situations, like those convicted of repeat driving-under-the-influence violations, Haven said defendants may be "just plain dangerous" and haven't responded to previous action against them.

Significant jail time may be the best option, he said.

"It's a positive thing, at that point; at that moment I can take someone off the street who could kill someone."

Haven said he repeatedly comes to a point where he reviews the law's requirements, all testimony and facts in a case, a person's life and their record and asks himself a question, whether it's a speeding ticket or an assault.

"What is best for the long-term good of our community?" Haven said. "And what is the best sentence for this specific person's life, in this specific situation?"

"There's not many jobs where you can make these kinds of decisions daily and have this kind of responsibility to make a real difference."