

ELLENSBURG DAILY RECORD

December 17, 2011

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Frances Chmelewski sworn in as Kittitas County Superior Court judge



Judge Frances Chmelewski is helped with her robe by her son Stephen, 13, after being sworn in as Superior Court Judge at the Kittitas County Courthouse, Friday, Dec. 16, 2011. (Brian Myrick / Daily Record)

Frances Chmelewski on Friday afternoon looked out at a packed courtroom and pledged to do her best as the 14th Kittitas County Superior Court Judge.

"I will work hard, that's the quality I bring; bottom line, hard work. You have my word on how hard I will work. I will do my best, I promise you," Judge Chmelewski said.

After a short ceremony during which she took the oath of office from retired Superior Court Judge Michael Cooper, and her son, 13-year-old Stephen Chmelewski, helped her into her judge's robe, she took a seat on the judicial bench next to Superior Court Judge Scott Sparks amid long and vibrant applause from the estimated 150 people in the standing-room-only audience.

Chmelewski replaces Cooper, who retired this fall. She is the third woman to sit on the local bench and Kittitas County's 14th superior court judge.

She said she searched for profound words to describe the kind of judge she will be, but realized in her more than 20 years of attorney practice she's never been a judge.

"When I do something, I don't do things half-hearted," she said. "I take something and dive in."

Judge Sparks said the swearing in of Chmelewski is both a joyous occasion and a solemn one: joyous that a new judge has joined the local court and solemn in that there's much to do to carry out the administration of local justice in a way that upholds the Constitution for all citizens.

Comments

Jim Pidduck, the Ellensburg city attorney, reminded the audience that Chmelewski has been the city's prosecutor for 12 years and will bring her same excellent skill set of diligence, fairness and respect for everyone's rights to the court.

Judge Cooper said his advice to her is to follow the directives found in the Bible's Old Testament in Micah 6:8: that God has told men what is required of them and what is good - to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

He said it's best for judges not to think of themselves as the Almighty, but to serve in the best way they can for all those who come before them.

Local attorney Richard Young said he's known Chmelewski since his first day of law school and has worked with her since then in Seattle Municipal Court and local courts.

Young praised her for her excellent work ethic, her sense of fairness "and a dedication to the principle that, as a prosecutor, her first duty is to see that justice is done."

Kittitas County Court Clerk Joyce Julsrud received laughter after she gave a pin to Chmelewski that said "Nothing works without clerks."

When asked about his mom becoming a judge, Stephen Chmelewski said he's proud of his mother, and he looks forward to having a judge for a mom.

"Instead of walking to her office downtown after school, I'll be walking to the courthouse, instead," he said.

Taking the bench

Chmelewski will officially take the bench and begin work Jan. 3. After an extensive interview process, she was appointed by Gov. Chris Gregoire. The position became vacant after Judge Michael Cooper retired in October.

After filling out a lengthy application, submitting 25 references, describing her judicial philosophy and submitting the application to the governor's office and various minority bar associations in the state, Chmelewski was one of two chosen for an interview with the governor.

Four other local attorneys applied for the appointment: Jon P. Ferguson, Paul R. Sander, John H.F. Ufkes and James T. Denison Jr.

Decision maker

In an interview earlier this week, Chmelewski said she's excited to be able to work with both sides of a case.

"I've been lawyering for 20 years," she said. "I've been on one side or another ... I've stood in the shoes of the wife, of the husband, of the child, of so many different angles.

"When this opening came, I felt ready, with all my training. I'm just ready to be the decision maker instead of the advocate."

In announcing her appointment, Gregoire said Chmelewski's background, which includes civil and criminal trial experience, arguing for both the prosecution and defense, and representing both private citizens and public entities, is impressive.

Chmelewski began her legal career as an attorney at the Seattle City Attorney's Office in 1990. There she focused on domestic violence cases.

She worked as an Assistant Attorney General in the Yakima regional office of the Attorney General, representing the state Department of Social and Health Services and Licensing and Labor and Industries in administrative and judicial proceedings.

Chmelewski opened the Law Offices of Frances P. Chmelewski in 1993. Through her practice she represented private clients in family law, general civil litigation and criminal defense.

Chmelewski has contracted with the city of Ellensburg to serve as city prosecutor since 1999. She has represented DSHS as a special attorney general in juvenile dependency cases in Kittitas County under a contract with the Office of Attorney General since 2003.

Chmelewski earned her bachelor's degree from Tufts University before graduating from the University of Puget Sound School of Law in 1989.

If Chmelewski wishes to keep her seat beyond the current term, she must run for re-election as judge in November 2012.

The value of a career, the challenge of law

Frances Chmelewski grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and her mother and father both graduated from college. Her mother, she remembers, made it a point that there is great value in gaining a college education, especially for young women, whether they ultimately worked in their field of study or not.

She said her mother saw such an education as a critical foundation for a woman in making her way through life.

"I think from my earliest years I believed that I would seek a professional career," said Chmelewski, 50. "From within myself, early in my life, I had that sense that I always wanted to be in a position to make a positive difference in people's lives."

While in high school, she lived a month in France as an exchange student with a sponsor family, and in her junior year at Tufts University at Boston she spent an academic year in Paris taking political science classes knowing she had a growing interest in law and the legalities of international diplomacy.

"I knew I was going the legal route in my career," Chmelewski said.

In her senior year at Tufts, that legal route in her education was strongly confirmed. She worked as an intern with a large law firm and witnessed first hand what attorneys, men and women, went through: the hard work of in-depth preparation and study, and the challenge and intensity of presenting a legal case in court.

"It was exhilarating," Chmelewski said.

She said she has participated in career days at local schools and has had Central Washington University student interns work in her law office. She said she introduces these students, especially girls and young women, to the value of a college education and the possibilities of a career in the legal field.

Chmelewski said she looks forward to working with both sides in legal matters that come before her as a judge as a way to resolve issues in the community and situations affecting people's lives. She wants to encourage people to move forward with the concerns in their lives that brought them to court in the first place and to make hard decisions on criminal matters.

She said the citizens of Kittitas County deserve a hard-working judge who who brings fairness and thoughtful deliberation to the administration of justice and she'll work hard to be that kind of judge.

Her husband, Mark Chmelewski, who maintains a separate law practice, said she has always impressed him with her hard legal work. He said she will serve well the citizens of the county.