

YAKIMA FREE PRESS
April 6, 2012

WA Supreme Court Justice Steve Gonzalez at the Rotary Club in Yakima

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By Harris Meyer

Observing Washington Supreme Court Justice Steve Gonzalez masterfully work the conservative crowd at the Rotary Club in Yakima Thursday showed me he's a public official with a bright future — maybe even a seat someday on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Gonzalez, who was appointed to the high court by Democratic Gov. Chris Gregoire in November and who is running for election in August, drew sustained applause and a standing ovation from about 200 people at the Rotary luncheon. He did it by delivering a modest-sounding, witty, and perfectly calibrated speech emphasizing his American Dream success story, the importance of justice and liberty, and especially his successful prosecution of an Algerian-born terrorist.

He also stressed his gratitude to the Rotary Club for granting him a post-graduate scholarship for 21 months of study in Japan, where he learned Japanese after having already learned Mandarin Chinese in college.

I saw him speak at the Yakima Chamber of Commerce earlier that morning and cautioned him after his brief talk about how conservative the audience would be. I expressed curiosity about how the mostly white, Republican crowd would receive a Hispanic, Democratic-appointed judge. He listened thoughtfully, asking me how I thought he did in his Chamber presentation. But as he demonstrated, he knows exactly how to present himself as a judicial candidate to all audiences.

Gonzalez, a handsome, dark-haired man in his 40s, is the second Hispanic justice on the Washington Supreme Court but the first Mexican-American. He grew up working class in Los Angeles, the son of a Mexican father and a white Jewish mother. The first person in his family to go to college, he graduated from Pitzer College, then attended University of California at Berkeley School of Law.

With fluency in both Chinese and Japanese, he landed a well-paid law firm trade working on international trade and could have had a lucrative career in private practice. But he told me that's not what he wanted to do. He left to become a domestic-violence prosecutor for the City of Seattle. Then he was hired as an assistant U.S. Attorney for Western Washington.

His career-making case was successfully prosecuting so-called Millenium bomber Ahmed Ressam, who currently is up for re-sentencing. He told the Rotarians that his three-prosecutor team won convictions against Ressam in federal court in Los Angeles in 2001 on nine charges related to his plot to bomb Los Angeles International Airport and other local airports. After being convicted, Ressam decided to cooperate, and Gonzalez spent lots of time with him in his cell

interrogating him about his time in al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and about his co-conspirators in Canada.

He captivated the audience by describing how he and his colleagues obtained key evidence that Canadian law enforcement had overlooked. Canadian officials had found a map, and Gonzalez asked if it had any writing on it; the officials said no. After a long legal process, Royal Canadian Mounted Police finally delivered the map to Gonzalez and the FBI in Seattle. They immediately noticed that it had circles drawn around several airport locations in Los Angeles, including LAX. Ressay's defense attorneys initially accused prosecutors of drawing those circles, but Ressay admitted that he had drawn them and intended to bomb the airports.

But while Gonzalez wowed the crowd with his terrorism-fighting experiences, he also stressed that the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution places justice ahead of everything else, including tranquility, the common defense, and welfare. He quoted Ben Franklin that those who give up liberty for temporary safety deserve neither and lose both. "Justice comes first," Gonzalez said. "If we give that up because we're afraid, we give up more than we know. We must be ever-vigilant about our liberties."

After serving as a federal prosecutor, Gonzalez was appointed to the King County Superior Court bench by Democratic Gov. Gary Locke in 2002. He was elected that year, and re-elected in 2004 and 2008.

Gonzalez, who has led efforts to ensure access to the courts for people of all income levels and racial and ethnic groups, currently is unopposed in his primary election bid. But he's concerned that at least one of the four candidates vying for an open Supreme Court seat – most likely former Justice Richard Sanders, a conservative who has endorsed Ron Paul for President — will switch over and run against him. If Gonzalez wins at least 50 percent of the votes cast in the Aug. 7 primary, he will run unopposed in the general election on Nov. 7.

Still, Gonzalez has the advantage of being a polished and politically savvy campaigner. Even though the U.S. Supreme Court ruled a few years ago that judicial candidates have a First Amendment right to express their personal views on issues, he skillfully sidesteps such questions because, as he explained, he would have to recuse himself if a case arose on which he had previously stated a position publicly ("Thanks but no thanks" is his joking comment about that Supreme Court ruling).

While sidestepping, he still managed to score political points with the Rotarians on hot-button conservative issues Thursday. Asked about states' rights, Gonzalez stressed that each state retains sovereign powers and the state supreme courts have the main say in interpreting state law. Asked about judges "legislating from the bench" – **a timely question as the five conservatives on the U.S. Supreme Court ponder overturning the health reform law passed by Congress** – Gonzalez said "we hear that a lot." He then won the audience over with a joke. "It usually means any time a court made a decision you don't like."