

TRI-CITY HERALD

## New judge sworn in on Benton-Franklin Superior Court

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*Sal Mendoza Jr., is sworn in as Benton-Franklin Superior Court's newest judge Monday with his wife Mia, holding a Bible and his daughter Carmen, 3, watching. Mendoza is replacing Judge Craig Matheson, who retired April 30 after serving 26 years on the bench. Mendoza, a Kennewick attorney, is a 1990 Prosser High School graduate who went on to get his bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Washington and his law degree from the University of California, Los Angeles. (RICHARD DICKIN/Tri-City Herald)*

Looking out over a packed courtroom Monday, newly sworn-in Judge Sal Mendoza Jr. said he felt “completely overwhelmed.” Before an audience, including Gov. Jay Inslee, three state Supreme Court justices and numerous elected officials, Judge Carrie Runge administered the oath to Mendoza, making him the first Latino judge on the Benton-Franklin Superior Court bench. His wife, Mia, held the Bible, and his children, Carmen, Danny and Anthony stood nearby.

Later, his mom, Maria, suited up the new judge in his black robe.

“Now I have the privilege of serving in a different capacity,” he said after taking a seat on the bench next to Runge. “A capacity where you share your values, where respect means something. Where personal responsibility actually does mean something. Those are the values that I have.”

Mendoza, of Kennewick, tipped his hat to Judge Craig Matheson, whose retirement last week after 26 years as a judge paved the way for his appointment. He also thanked family members in Spanish.

Runge took time to recognize Mendoza’s late sister, Ilda L. Islas, 44, and her 14-year-old daughter, Alejandra “Alex” Islas of Prosser, who died in a car crash in October. “It is truly wonderful for us to be here and gather around the Mendoza family and celebrate in triumph,” Runge said.

Inslee said he knew about the Mid-Columbia’s talent pool in engineering, agriculture and education from his time representing the area in Congress for two years in the early 1990s. That made him want to ensure that he found a judge with great legal capability, deep roots in the community and an ability to serve for many years, he said.

The governor said he found such a person in 41-year-old Mendoza. While the appointment brought together judges, prosecutors and defense lawyers in Benton and Franklin counties, it also is making waves across Washington.

“I can tell you I’ve been traveling the state the last week for a variety of reasons, and you would be impressed to see the number of people who have noticed Sal’s becoming the first serving Latino judge right now in Eastern Washington,” Inslee said. “It’s something that makes the whole state proud, not only because of that fact, but because of Sal’s statewide reputation. ... I think it speaks volumes about this community that understands the wisdom of this decision, for a lot of reasons.”

While 100 people filled the seats Monday of Courtroom B at the Benton County Justice Center, dozens more stood in the hallway for the ceremony, which also included Inslee’s signing of a bill that creates a seventh judicial position in Benton-Franklin Superior Court.

State Supreme Court Justice Steven Gonzalez, who was joined at the ceremony by Justices Charles Johnson and Sheryl Gordon McCloud, said Mendoza is “so much more” than just a legal scholar.

“We praise Gov. Inslee’s wisdom in appointing you to Superior Court,” Gonzalez said. “But with no disrespect to the governor, it was an easy choice for him. Your qualifications are exemplary. You are brilliant and you are balanced.”

Mendoza was raised in a family of migrant farm workers who moved to the Yakima Valley from California when he was a child. Mendoza graduated from Prosser High School in 1990 and earned his bachelor’s degree in philosophy from the University of Washington and his law degree from the University of California, Los Angeles. He was the owner of a Kennewick law firm.

Inslee announced Mendoza’s appointment April 23 as Matheson was retiring four months into his four-year term. To finish out the term, Mendoza will have to run to keep his seat in the fall election.

He was one of four applicants for the position, along with Assistant U.S. Attorney Alex Ekstrom, who practices throughout Eastern Washington; Paulette R. Burgess, a criminal lawyer who practices in Grant and Spokane counties; and Pasco attorney Ted Sams, whose area of expertise is administrative/regulatory, consumer and criminal law.

Mendoza first ran for the bench in 2008, when he lost to Bruce Spanner in the race for the seat vacated by retiring Judge Dennis Yule. But this time Mendoza gained widespread support, taking 60 of 66 votes as the top choice for the judgeship in a Benton Franklin Counties Bar Association poll.

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