

## Mendoza becomes newest Benton-Franklin Superior Court justice

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By Kristin M. Kraemer

Five minutes after sitting down with Gov. Jay Inslee in Olympia, Sal Mendoza Jr.'s cellphone rang with a blocked number.

Mendoza was so stressed from his judicial interview on Friday that he almost let it go to voice mail, until wife Mia told him to answer it.

When the person on the other end said, "This is Jay Inslee," Mendoza's long pause led the caller to clarify that it was the Washington governor.

Inslee then made the offer to Mendoza that became official Tuesday — the Kennewick lawyer will become the newest judge on the Benton-Franklin Superior Court bench.

"He was very nice and gracious and said some very nice things," Mendoza said of his follow-up call with Inslee. "It was a surreal, exciting experience. The whole thing has been amazing."

Mendoza will replace Judge Craig Matheson, who is retiring April 30 after serving 26 years.

Mendoza will be the first Latino judge in the bicounty judicial system. He was raised in a family of migrant farm workers who moved from California to the Yakima Valley when he was a young child.

His term begins May 6 with a 3:30 p.m. swearing-in ceremony at the Benton County Justice Center, according to Superior Court administration.

"First and foremost, I think it's important to have the best qualified person on the bench. I happen to think that I'm that person," Mendoza told the Herald shortly after the announcement was made. "I think with that comes certainly the experience of growing up in this community — understanding Eastern Washington and the Tri-Cities, but also understanding the Latino community."

"I think that's going to be a strength for our bench," he added. "I think it's going to be something positive with the judges, and also with the people that appear before you."

Inslee had to select Matheson's replacement, since the judge is leaving just four months into a new four-year term.

That means Mendoza will need to run for election this fall to retain his seat.

He was one of four applicants for the position. The others were 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 Ted Sams, a Pasco attorney whose area of expertise is administrative/regulatory, consumer and criminal law.

The candidates were interviewed April 11 in the Tri-Cities by the governor's general counsel, Nicholas Brown.

Mendoza then met with Inslee last Friday.

"Salvador has an impressive legal résumé and an equally inspiring background that will serve him well as a judge for the people of Benton and Franklin counties," Inslee said in his news release.

"He has deep roots in the Tri-Cities community and is deeply respected for his work and expertise. He definitely stood out as an exceptional choice for this job," the governor said.

Matheson had told the Herald earlier this year that if Mendoza filed for the seat, he would put his support behind him, because he thinks it will be good for the community to have a Hispanic judge on the bench.

On Tuesday, Matheson said he was happy that the governor followed through and appointed the "very qualified" Mendoza.

"He will make a great judge, academically and personally," said Matheson, who has been a Superior Court judge for 20 years, preceded by six years with Benton County District Court. "He has a very strong character and I think he will do a great job."

Matheson's last day on the bench is Thursday with the Benton County criminal docket. He will take a vacation day Friday, then spend his two final two days as a judge presiding over the Superior Court Judges Association of Washington conference in Cle Elum. Matheson is outgoing president of the state association.

The longtime judge said he is glad the court won't be shorthanded too long with his early departure.

Meanwhile, legislation to add a seventh judge in Benton-Franklin Superior Court has made its way to the governor's desk and is awaiting a signature, Matheson said. Then it

will be up to commissioners in the two counties to fund the position, with the goal of having someone in place in 2014.

Mendoza first ran for election to the bench in 2008 against Bruce Spanner. That was for the seat vacated by Judge Dennis Yule.

Spanner beat Mendoza by a large margin, and now is the Superior Court presiding judge. This time around, Mendoza got overwhelming support from his legal peers. He received 60 out of 66 votes as the top choice for the judgeship in a Benton Franklin Counties Bar Association poll.

“I consider myself a good attorney and I want to be an even better judge, so that’s going to be my hope and my focus,” he said.

Mendoza has said he was called to this work, and now feels an extra sense of responsibility since he grew up in the Mid-Columbia.

He graduated from Prosser High in 1990, and went on to the University of Washington for a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and the University of California Los Angeles for his law degree.

Mendoza lives in Kennewick with Mia, also a lawyer, and their three children.

He has been a lawyer for 15 years, including a year as an assistant attorney general and a year as a deputy prosecutor in Franklin County. He also has helped out as a pro tem judge in juvenile, municipal, district and superior courts.

Mendoza helped start the Juvenile Drug Court program, has been a proponent of equal access to justice through his work with Benton-Franklin Legal Aid Society, and is a Columbia Basin College trustee.

He said he needs to review the canons of judicial conduct, but believes he will have to step down from his trustee position.

“I really want to thank the community for the groundswell of support that they’ve given me, that they’ve shown me, especially Judge Matheson who has gone above and beyond, along with the bar association and all the attorneys here,” Mendoza told the Herald.

He said he also got support from the prosecutors in both counties, defense attorneys, civil practitioners and his friends at CBC and the school districts.

Benton County Prosecutor Andy Miller praised Mendoza, saying “Sal not only has the legal qualities that would make him an excellent judge, but also has the human qualities.”

Mendoza is recognized by his peers for his experience and work ethic, said Franklin County Prosecutor Shawn Sant. “He strives for justice and equality in the legal profession,” Sant said.

Mendoza has been wrapping up his private caseload just in case he got the judicial appointment. The Mendoza & Johnson law firm will continue to provide legal services with attorneys Mia Mendoza, Scott Johnson and Adrienne Farabee, he said.

Inslee has had a list of judicial appointments to make across the state since he took office in January.

The past two judicial appointments in Benton-Franklin Superior Court were made by Gov. Gary Locke: Judge Carrie Runge in December 2003 and Judge Cameron Mitchell six months later.

When Locke made those announcements, he gathered the final three candidates in a courtroom and named his top choice in front of family, friends, lawyers and court staff.

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