

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: HON. ROBERT J. TRENTACOSTA

Q: You have held many assignments on the San Diego Superior Court bench. How did you come to be in juvenile court?

A: It is generally understood in our court that when you finish your tenure as presiding judge, you may request your assignment of choice. When my term concluded, I asked to be assigned to juvenile court. After many years handling adult criminal cases, I saw how the movie often ends. I wanted to see if early, positive intervention could change some of the sad, senseless endings that are part of daily life in adult criminal court. I was optimistic that many young people could be redirected toward a better path. My optimism was rewarded.

Q: What are some ways the juvenile court assignment is different from your previous assignments?

A: Most significantly, it is the engagement the judge has with the individual kids and their families. In adult criminal, you typically speak to the defendant through counsel. In juvenile court, the kids want to speak directly to you. If you do it right, they want to engage with you. It can be like improv theater because you never quite know what they or their parents will say. That also makes the work interesting and challenging. When the youth gains insight and bonds with you, positive changes occur.

Q: What are some of the ethical issues that commonly arise in a juvenile court assignment?

A: Juvenile is an assignment that needs strict adherence to canon 3A of the Code of Judicial Ethics requiring a judge to be patient, dignified, and courteous to all. The kids, families, and victims that come before the court are often in crisis and very emotional. Many of the families are struggling, dysfunctional, or have given up. Sometimes they lack diplomacy and discernment. It is important for the judge to recognize these situations as an opportunity to inject hope and find a way forward. As a judge, you achieve this by setting the proper tone in the courtroom. You must be a good listener, empathetic, and decisive. Treating everyone with respect is not only the right thing to do, but it is the most effective way to preside over a busy, emotionally fraught calendar.

As juvenile court judges, we are uniquely required to be active in the community on behalf of the youth and their families. (Cal. Stds. Jud. Admin., std. 5.40(e).) The risk of ex parte communication increases once you step outside the courtroom and engage in the community. You must take care not to discuss the specifics of a case ex parte. At the same time, you are expected to advocate for services and opportunities on behalf of the children and their families. I find that in speaking to the community, members of the audience want to relate

their personal experiences, sometimes regarding pending cases, so a judge must be mindful of the ethical constraints.

Q: What advice would you give to a judge considering a juvenile court assignment?

A: I have done nearly every superior court assignment. For me, juvenile is the most fulfilling and rewarding. If your PJ assigns you to juvenile court, be thankful. Of course in any new assignment you must learn the substantive law and procedure, and juvenile court is no exception. However, I find that real-life parenting skills are the most practical and useful tools at your disposal. If you make decisions based on what is best for the youth and the community, you are on the right path.

Q: Your colleagues say you are a man of diverse interests. In addition to your work on your court and for the branch, you are also an adjunct professor of law, a passionate traveler, an author of guidebooks and articles on art, and an avid athlete. Can you share some of your passions with us?

A: I love to travel and discover. Before COVID, I would often be asked for recommendations from friends who were going to travel abroad. I would make lists and suggestions to them, but it was very informal. Once COVID hit, I had to cancel trips, and like everyone else, I was stuck at home. Instead of stewing about it, I decided to write travel guides that would be different from the usual travel books. I focused on culture, art, architecture, history, and discovery. I illustrated the guides with lots of photographs and pictures. The goal was to inform but also get my friends excited about what they would see. I ended up with digital guides to 14 cities throughout the world. I am so grateful to be able to travel again. It is the perfect antidote to the rigors of our chosen profession.