



Hon. Peter C. Economus, District Judge for the Northern District of Ohio

Please allow me to tell a brief introductory story before launching full force into this judicial profile. Near the beginning of my clerkship, I decided that I would ask Judge Peter Economus if I could write this profile. I was prompted by an experience I had early one morning at work. The Judge came into my office and asked if I would conduct further research on specific issues in an upcoming criminal sentencing. I could see the Judge was troubled, and he explained that he had stayed up all night thinking about the case. At first, I thought that there must have been something wrong with the materials and research I had prepared a few days earlier. The Judge quickly dispensed of my unease and explained that after reading the file, he just had some additional questions. He was especially concerned with the gravity of the crime and the defendant's personal background history. As the Judge spoke, I realized that the instant sentencing was not one of exceptional difficulty, nor was it extraordinary for any other reason; the Judge simply handled every sentencing with this degree of care and precision. He wanted to get it right. It was heartening to know that after sending people to jail for almost 33 years, the Judge still stayed up nights thinking about the man he would sentence the next day. Judge Economus' compassion, fairness, and dedication to justice reminded me of why I decided to pursue the law as a career. Since that day, I have shared many mornings with the Judge drinking coffee and discussing a case he stayed up thinking about the night before.

It is my endeavor to write this judicial profile with the same thoroughness and attention to detail that the Judge gives to every criminal sentencing. Hopefully, with the right amount tact and thoughtfulness, the



words below will capture some semblance of Hon. Peter C. Economus, 44th district judge for the Northern District of Ohio.

Judge Peter Economus' life story tells like a classic American tale—one of humble beginnings in a land of opportunity. Born to Greek immigrants in Youngstown, Ohio, the Judge identifies as a Greek-American. The most influential person in the Judge's life was his father, Constantine Economus. His father's ideals serve as the foundation for the Judge's values and character. Therefore, this profile will start with the father.

Steven C. Babin currently works as a law clerk for Hon. Allan E. Norris, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. He previously clerked for Hon. Peter C. Economus, district judge for the Northern District of Ohio. Steven graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Class of 2014.



Constantine, the son of a Greek shepherd, came to this country in 1916 at the age of 16. When Constantine first arrived in the United States, he spoke no English and worked at a restaurant washing dishes. In his spare time, Constantine educated himself. He got his GED through a program at the local YMCA. Constantine then enrolled in college and decided to pursue the law. He went on to become a prominent lawyer and civic leader in Youngstown, Ohio. Constantine was a strong advocate for education, and he continued to study throughout his life, even earning a master's in law degree. He practiced law until he passed away at age 93.

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When discussing his own legal path, Judge Economus states, "I backed into law school." He explains that he enrolled at the University of Akron (Ohio) Law School after continuous requests from his father and brother, who had followed in the footsteps of his father. It's a little-known fact, but the Judge's first career choice was dentistry. "I didn't have the dexterity for it," the Judge remembers. He remained interested in science, however, graduating from Youngstown State University with a biology degree. After undergrad, he took a job at Westinghouse in its manager-training program. Dissatisfied with his work at Westinghouse, he

acquiesced to family and enrolled in law school. During summers, while on break from law school, he worked at the local steel mill. "I know how to make steel pipe," the Judge brags now, showing the pictures of the old steel mill that hang in his chambers.

After graduating from law school, he displayed his ability to remain calm in high-pressure situations, with his daughter, Kristine, being born the day before the Ohio Bar Exam. True to form, he passed. His first job as a lawyer was with Legal Aid, a position that he believes contributed to his appointment to the federal bench. While at Legal Aid, he filed a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of an indigent client, challenging his jail sentence in lieu of payment of a fine under *Short v. Tate*. After successfully arguing the case, no indigent defendants were jailed for nonpayment of a fine in Mahoning County, Ohio. He later joined the family firm, duly named Economus, Economus, Economus. The Judge explains, "It was a different time—we were street lawyers"—a term indicating that they took all types of cases: big and small, civil and criminal.

At age 39, Economus ran for Mahoning County (Ohio) Court of Common Pleas.¹ Although very humble, the Judge has a sort of altruistic gravitas—he seems trustworthy, and that attracted voters. His first political endeavor proved overwhelmingly successful, and he was elected common pleas judge in 1982. The Judge's campaign set precedent in Mahoning County, as he was the first Democrat *not* to run on the party ticket. "I wasn't attached to anyone. I wasn't owned by the Democratic Party. I was just a young lawyer who, in my own mind, thought was qualified to be a common pleas judge," he explains. At that time, the Mahoning County Democratic Party was a political machine that controlled the local corridors of power. In fact, party Chairman Don Hanni became somewhat of a nemesis to the Judge. Hanni, a criminal defense lawyer, intimidated the local office holders, including the judges. Hanni also thought that *he* decided who sat on the bench. He was wrong. "He was corrupt, and so were his cronies," says the Judge. "I didn't have any interest in being one of his lackeys. I wanted to bring justice back to Youngstown."

Sitting between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, Youngstown served as a battleground for warring mafia families. Indeed, mafia bloodlines run deep in Youngstown's history. Suffice it to say, the mafia had its fingerprint in area politics. Yet, in the midst of corruption, crime, and scandals, Judge Economus never faltered; he always walked a straight line, guided by the simple principles his father taught him as a child—honesty, integrity, and respect. In the mid-1990s, when politicians and lawyers were being convicted for corrupt practices, Judge Economus remained unscathed. Many of the Judge's stories about those times end with "He was disbarred, indicted, and sent to federal prison." All in all, more than 70 individuals, including lawyers, four judges, the county prosecutor, the county sheriff, and other political officeholders, were sent to prison.

Judge Economus not only upheld the integrity of the bench, but he served with distinction. While on the common pleas bench, the Judge was selected by the Supreme Court of Ohio to serve as a mentor for new judges and was appointed by the Ohio Attorney General to serve on the Ohio State Victims' Advisory Board. He also won the Ohio Common Pleas Judges Association's Golden Gavel Award. Other awards during that time include the University of Akron Law Alumni Association Outstanding Alumni Award, the Community Corrections Association Public Service Award, and the Youngstown Hearing and Speech Center's Great Communicator Award for Community Service. In 2011, the Judge was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Youngstown State University.

Judge Economus was appointed to the federal bench on July 3, 1995, by then-President Bill Clinton. Judge Economus has the distinction of being the first federal judge to sit in Youngstown following the opening of the new courthouse in 1993. "They say that timing is everything," explained the Judge, "and I believe that good

timing played a part in getting me where I am today.” Certainly there is truth to this statement. However, it is apparent to anyone who examines Judge Economus’s life that his success as an attorney and judge is based upon his strong sense of commitment to the community and the legal profession, and the remarkable example set by his father.

Judge John Manos was a strong advocate for Judge Economus’s federal appointment. “Judge Manos’ reputation for hard work, dedication, and, above all, a sense of fairness for those appearing before him is well-known,” said Arthur I. Harris, in a tribute to Judge Manos (43 Clev. St. L. Rev. 3 (1995)). Judge Manos served as a mentor to Judge Economus and became one of his closest friends.

Since the beginning, Judge Economus has treated his chambers staff and law clerks like family. “We rise and fall together,” he explains. Former courtroom deputy Suzanne Bertelli-Ray describes the Judge as “one of the chosen few—he is the most honest, dedicated, sincere man I know.”

The Judge is unsurpassed in his dedication to mentoring his law clerks. He takes the time to teach his clerks about the complexity of the law and also stresses the importance of more practical lessons, such as “preparation wins cases” or “always be nice to people.” The Judge describes working with and helping his law clerks as one of his greatest joys. His dedication shows, as the Judge has remained a lifelong mentor to many of his former law clerks.

Indeed, his clerks are very appreciative and grateful for the time they spent under the Judge’s tutelage. Here are just a few comments from former clerks:

- “Judge Economus believed in his law clerks and was comfortable giving them the great responsibility of assisting him in reaching not only correct but also well-reasoned conclusions to complex legal questions. This was so instrumental in honing my legal judgment and skill. I also admired his commitment to a courtroom where everyone, regardless of standing, retained their dignity and respect when they appeared before him.” —*Nick Kolovos, former clerk, 1995–96*
- “He knew I wanted to be a trial lawyer, and he was always willing to sit down and analyze tactics, the rules of evidence, and anything else I wanted to study.” —*Brian Kopp, former clerk, 1995–97*
- “Most of all, I remember how he included me as part of his family. He even threw me a shower when I was getting married.” —*Bobby Psaropoulos, former clerk, 1997–99*
- “Judge Economus shaped my career in innumerable ways. He has been an unfailing source of advice, counsel, and encouragement in the 13 years since I

left his chambers.” —*Brian Laliberte, former clerk, 1999–2001*

- “The Judge taught me that being a lawyer required a strong sense of right and wrong, as well as the willingness to treat every colleague, client, staff member, parking attendant, server at a restaurant, etc. as a human being that is a member of our community and deserving of dignity and respect.” —*Dan Uczjo, former clerk, 2001–06*
- “I was very green about how a federal criminal trial proceeds, but the judge was incredibly patient. I could immediately tell that he was a great mentor and that he was very serious about mentoring his clerks. He helped me along through the process and listened to my input, despite my inexperience. I quickly learned that he viewed the clerkship as a learning process.” —*Brent Ryan, former clerk, 2006–08*
- “He took an interest in our lives and families, and in our future careers.” —*Pete Daly, former clerk, 2007–10*
- “Nothing has shaped my career more than clerking for Judge Economus. As an attorney, not a week goes by that I don’t draw on that experience in some way. But more importantly, the advice and counsel I received, and continue to receive, from the Judge are what I value the most. He remains my most important mentor.” —*Jesse Cantrell, former clerk, 2008–11*
- “Judge Economus has a terrific sense of humor, albeit a quiet one, which is appreciated during times of high stress. ... [He] has always been an ally, providing me with great advice and support, even after I left the court.” —*Holly Wallinger, former clerk, 2011–13*

While on the federal bench Judge Economus has presided over and helped resolve countless cases. He has an excellent judicial temperament and the unique ability to be firm and humble at the same time. The Judge strategizes quite a bit as to how to help the parties reach a middle ground in order to save the parties money and free up resources for the court. “I like to solve problems with negotiations rather than just slamming the gavel,” he said. “I’ve been successful in settling cases—I think that’s one of my strong points.”

In 1999, Judge Economus tried the very first economic espionage case. Adam L. Penberg and Mark Barry deftly describe Judge Economus’s temperament during the trial in their book *Espionage in Corporate America* (2000): “He not only had a deep understanding of the law, indeed, a passion for it mixed with a heavy dose of common sense, he has a way with people. During the

course of the trial, he relied on dry wit and homespun humor to kill boredom, defuse tensions, and connect with the jurors.” The defendants in that case were convicted of two counts of theft of trade secrets by conspiring and attempting to steal company secrets for adhesive technology developed by Avery Dennison.

One of the Judge’s proudest moments came in 1999, when he was awarded the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, an American award founded by the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations, which pays homage to the immigrant experience and the contribution made to America by immigrants and their children. The medals are awarded to native-born and naturalized U.S. citizens. Past medalists include six presidents, as well as Nobel Prize winners and leaders of industry, education, the arts, sports, and government. “The thrill for me was to get the award on Ellis Island, where my Greek-born father and mother first stepped on American soil many years ago to find a new, great life,” said the Judge.

Judge Economus took senior status in 2009 and in 2010 moved his chambers to Columbus, Ohio, to be closer to his children. Chief Judge Edmund Sargus of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio remembers, “We were all delighted when Judge Economus expressed an interest in working on cases in Columbus. All the district judges had known Judge Economus before he began working with us. We’ve always known him to be a great jurist and a wonderful human being. I think this was the easiest request we’d ever had.”

Judge Economus has a likeability that follows him wherever he goes. It has even garnered him a little fame. He was featured in “Gasoline Alley,” a syndicated cartoon strip, where he presides over a naturalization and tells a group of citizens-to-be the story of his father coming to this country. Kravitz Delicatessen in Youngstown named a sandwich after the Judge—“The Economus: You be the judge! A portion of corned beef and a portion of lean pastrami separated by a lawyer of Swiss. The

judge has ruled that we dry grill this sandwich.” And, in Columbus, the Judge’s picture takes a prominent position on the celebrity wall at the famous Tommy’s Diner.

Even while on senior status, Judge Economus remained sharp as a tack. Judge Economus has an incredible knack for remembering names. He remembers the name of almost every past case, including the parties’ and the lawyers’ names. Judge Economus has also stayed very active on the bench. He ruled on two landmark voting cases in Ohio: *Obama for America v. Husted*, Case No. 2:12-CV-0636; and *NAACP v. Husted*, Case No. 14-CV-404. Both cases dealt with whether the Ohio legislature’s retraction of in-person early voting access deprived Ohio voters of the fundamental right to vote. Judge Economus’s ruling in *NAACP v. Husted* directed Ohio to restore early voting during evenings and on at least two Sundays and to reinstate “Golden Week,” the first week of early voting in which many African-American churches organized congregants to register and vote on the same day. David Firestone of *The New York Times* called the Judge’s ruling “a remarkable decision in purely human terms, showing a deeply compassionate understanding of the lives of the low-income people who have been the most harmed by Republican efforts to put barriers around the ballot box.”

In September, Judge Economus changed his status to inactive. While he has left the bench, his memory will remain steadfast. I am confident that the Judge will continue to serve as a mentor and a model to all those who come across his path. “I hope my legacy will be that every party who came into my courtroom can say in the end that they were satisfied that their case was handled fairly—that there was justice,” he said. ☺

Endnotes

¹The major civil and criminal trial court under the Ohio judicial system.

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