

Judicial Profile

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Hon. Joel M. Feldman U.S. Magistrate Judge, Northern District of Georgia

WALKING INTO THE chambers of U.S. Magistrate Judge Joel M. Feldman, it is easy to sense that the room holds a colorful history with many stories to be told. Adorning the walls and shelves are countless mementos and collectibles — from military swords, guns, and hats to antique cameras, photographs, awards, and other memorabilia. Merely ask about any item, and the judge

quickly conjures the people, places, and events surrounding it, as if the article had arrived on his shelf the day before. Judge Feldman's chambers, however, only hint at the myriad stories that make up his extensive and impressive career, one that is drawing to a close after 32 years.

A second-generation Atlanta native, Judge Feldman received both his undergraduate and law degrees from Emory University. Always precocious, he sat for the Georgia bar exam during his second year of law school and was a practicing attorney by the time he reached the age of 22. Judge Feldman's mother had been wary of his aspirations for a career in the law and hoped that he would attend Georgia Tech and become an engineer instead. "She was worried that I would not be able to make a living as a lawyer," the judge recalls with a smile and a slight drawl, "but it's worked out all right."

From 1964 through 1966, Judge Feldman served as legislative counsel to the Georgia General Assembly, a position that came about after a chance meeting with Frank Edwards, a friend of a friend who worked in the assembly and suggested that Judge Feldman apply for a position. Soon, Judge Feldman's boss from the House of Representatives, Arthur Bolton, was appointed attorney general by the governor. The judge unexpectedly found himself assistant attorney general of the state of Georgia — at the age of 24. That experience helped him to land an appointment as a Fulton County assistant district attorney in 1968. There, he helped rewrite Georgia's criminal code; worked on legislation dealing with wiretapping and auto theft; and worked closely with the legendary Sam Nunn, then a freshman state representative.

Judge Feldman's quick path climbed even higher



when Sam Nunn recruited Judge Feldman to act as a policy adviser during his successful 1972 campaign for an open seat in the U.S. Senate. Judge Feldman accompanied the new senator from Georgia to Washington, D.C., and spent 18 months on Capitol Hill, serving as the senator's legislative assistant and legal counsel.

In 1974, a homesick Judge Feldman returned to Atlanta. But even before he could settle into his office in the Appeals Section of the district attorney's office, he received a call from Sidney Smith, then the chief judge of the Northern District of Georgia, who asked him to apply for one of two recently created magistrate judgeships. Once Judge Feldman received assurances that he would be able to handle both civil and criminal matters, he agreed to apply; and, on Oct. 23, 1974, he took his oath of office, joining Judge Allen Chancey as the second magistrate judge for the Northern District of Georgia.

"My impression of Joel when I served with him was that he had more devotion and love of the U.S. courts than almost anybody," Judge Chancey recalls. "By vir-

tue of that he will do anything to help anybody he can." Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Judge Feldman's brand of justice is his concern for those who are less fortunate. His time in the courtroom has given Judge Feldman an opportunity to directly attend to what he sees as a troublesome issue in the legal community. "The poor and downtrodden are not necessarily able to get all of the due process they are entitled to because of lack of funds," the judge explains, "so I made it my business as a judge to ensure all of their rights are protected even if their own attorneys fall down on the job." Whether raising essential questions when a lawyer fails to do so or stepping in to replace appointed counsel who is not adequately representing a client, Judge Feldman always stays focused on effective assistance, both to help protect the record and to head off any later motion for a new, prohibitively expensive trial.

The growth of the city of Atlanta has directly affected the judge's courthouse and caseload, each going through multiple transformations during his time on the bench. Judge Feldman recalls when the suburbs of Roswell and Alpharetta, for example, had populations of 5,000 and 2,000 people, respectively; these areas now hold about 90,000 and 40,000 people, respectively. In response to the expansion of the population during Judge Feldman's tenure, the number of full-time magistrate judges in the Northern District of Georgia has grown from two to nine. As for his courtroom, he has seen the federal magistrates gain partial responsibility for bankruptcy cases — originally about 700 cases a year — as well as employment discrimination cases, which started at about 100, but have leveled off to a "calm" 40 or 50 across his desk each year.

The bench has been an exciting and rewarding experience for Judge Feldman. He particularly revels in the criminal docket, because he never knows what the day may bring. And with more than three decades on the court, Judge Feldman's fingerprints are on a number of high-profile cases. He made the national news in 1998, when he issued an arrest warrant for Eric Rudolph, the Olympic Park bomber. More recently, Judge Feldman's docket has included the cases of Syed Haris Ahmed, the Georgia Tech student indicted on terrorism charges, and Joya Williams, who garnered headlines for her attempts to sell Coca-Cola trade secrets to rival Pepsi Cola. In addition, Judge Feldman presided over the case involving Michael Thevis, Atlanta's most notorious pornographer, during which a key prosecution witness was murdered. The judge also handled portions of the case of Walter Leroy Moody, who mailed bombs to an Eleventh Circuit judge and to an attorney, killing both.

Judge Feldman's contributions to the law include his service as a director of the Federal Magistrate Judges Association. His many honors and awards include the Atlanta Bar Association's recognition of his contributions to the legal community.



(top photo, l t r) Memorial day at Marietta Cemetary: Magsitrate Judge (Capt.) Joel M. Feldman, JAGC, USNR and Capt. Harley Jones, USNR; (middle photo) Judge Feldman and his family at The Square in Kansas City: wife, Debora Feldman, daughter, Allison Feldman Labasi, Judge Feldman, and son, Lon Feldman; (bottom photo, l t r) Judge Feldman at Stonehenge, England with his wife, Debora, and sister-in-law, Melba Bates.

Judge Feldman is a larger-than-life character even outside the courtroom. His interest in the military was sparked by his six-month tour of duty as an enlisted airman with the U.S. Air Force immediately after he finished law school. That service later translated into a 1964 commission as a lieutenant junior grade in the Navy Reserve Judge Advocate General program. He served as an assistant judge advocate general and military judge, retiring from the Navy as a captain only in 1992. A born leader, the judge has held numerous posts in a range of military organizations, including stints as president of the Navy League, the Naval Order, and the southeastern section of the Naval Reserve Association (which covers seven states and 3,500 naval officers).

His faith and family are also important parts of the judge's life. He served as president of his synagogue from 1994 to 1996, capping a record that included service as a music teacher and as a member of the board of trustees, where he acted as parliamentarian. In 1967, Judge Feldman married his wife Debora, who had a six-year-old son from a previous marriage. The judge's son Lawrence was born in 1972, and his daughter Allison followed two years later. Lawrence gave him his first grandchild in 1990, and Allison brought twin boys into the family in 2004. The judge is a doting grandfather, proudly displaying pictures of his grandchildren above his desk and always ready with candy should they come by for a visit. One of the judge's first stops after his retirement will be Germany, where Allison and her family are living while her husband, a major in the Army, is stationed there.

One of Judge Feldman's favorite functions as a judge is officiating at marriages. In 1983, he prevailed upon the state legislature to amend the relevant statute to define "judge" to include federal judges. Since then, he has presided at some 400 weddings, including those of his son and daughter. "It is such a great

thing to put families together," he notes.

Current Chief Magistrate Judge Gerrilyn Brill states that "when Joel Feldman retires, the court will lose someone with an extraordinarily broad range of knowledge. It goes without saying that he knows everything there is to know about what federal magistrate judges do." But she emphasizes, "With Joel, it is much more than that. He has a great depth of knowledge about history, current events, and many other subjects, and he is genuinely interested in just about everything and everyone." She says that she will also miss his generosity and his "great sense of humor."

As the career of Judge Joel M. Feldman comes to a close this fall, we can rest assured that the closing of his time on the bench is not the end of his story, but merely the beginning of another chapter in an already remarkable life. His advice to others in the legal field is simply to "recognize when opportunity arises and be willing to take advantage of it." His career so far has been a perfect illustration of that counsel, and it is hard to imagine that his retirement from the bench will be any different. **TFL**

Evan Andersen, a former intern for Judge Feldman in Atlanta, worked for Cahill, Gordon & Reindel LLP in New York for a year and a half, before beginning law school at Wake Forest University School of Law in Winston-Salem, N.C., where he is now a legal research and writing teaching assistant. He plans to return to Atlanta to practice law after he graduates in 2008.