

Judicial Profile

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Hon. Irma E. Gonzalez U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of California

UNTIL HER SOPHOMORE year at Stanford University, Judge Irma E. Gonzalez, who recently passed the gavel as chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California, planned to follow in the footsteps of her father into the practice of medicine. One course of organic chemistry changed all that. "It was a difficult course, which led me to do some soul searching," Gonzalez recalls. After deciding that she no longer wanted to be a doctor and did not want to use her degree in history to become an educator, Judge Gonzalez settled on becoming a lawyer. She enrolled at the University of Arizona School of Law, where she recalls being one of eight or nine women in a class of 175 students. Even though she was embarking into a male-dominated profession, Judge Gonzalez "never gave it a second thought," an attitude that she attributes to her always encouraging parents.

After graduating in 1973, Judge Gonzalez acknowledges that she was very lucky to obtain a clerkship with Tucson federal Judge William C. Frey. "Legal jobs for women were hard to come by during those days," she said. "The clerkship really opened a lot of doors for me." From clerking, Judge Gonzalez developed an interest in criminal law, which led her to her next position as an assistant U.S. attorney in the criminal division of the agency's Tucson office. In 1979, the position took her out to Los Angeles where she met her future husband, Robert Brewer, who was also an assistant U.S. attorney at the time



and is now a partner at Jones Day.

After a couple of years, the two decided it was time for a change and moved to San Diego, where Judge Gonzalez entered private practice at the firm then called Seltzer, Caplan, Wilkins & McMahon. She worked on civil cases until 1984, when she was selected to serve as a U.S. magistrate judge in the Southern District of California. Judge Gonzalez served in that position until 1991, when she was appointed by Gov. George Deukmejian to the Superior Court. The following year, she was nominated by President George H.W. Bush to the federal bench. Upon her confirmation, Judge Gonzalez became the first Mexican-American female judge in the United States.

On Jan. 22, 2005, Judge Gonzalez became chief judge for the Southern District of California; on Jan. 20, 2012, she marked the end of her term and an unprecedented 21 years of female leadership in the Southern District of California when she passed the gavel of chief judge to her successor, Hon. Barry Ted Moskowitz.

Like Hon. Judith N. Keep and Hon. Marilyn L. Huff, both of whom preceded her as chief judge of

the Southern District of California, Judge Gonzalez's tenure as chief judge was marked by several major accomplishments for which both the court and the San Diego community will be eternally indebted to her. First, Judge Gonzalez was instrumental in the implementation of the Case Management and Electronic Case Filing system (CM/ECF). The process required the electronic conversion of approximately 100,000 records from the court's docket, which was no small undertaking. Judge Gonzalez's leadership in the development of the CM/ECF system was critical in moving the court into the digital era.

Judge Gonzalez's greatest accomplishment (and biggest challenge), however, was obtaining funds from Congress for the construction of a new federal courthouse. Planning for the courthouse first began more than 15 years ago, during Judge Keep's tenure as chief judge. Judge Huff, who succeeded Judge Keep as chief judge, was also instrumental in the courthouse project, achieving funding for the design and land acquisition process. Shortly after Judge Huff passed the gavel to Judge Gonzalez, the Hotel San Diego was imploded to make way for the new courthouse construction. Less than two years later, however, the 2008 financial crisis hit, jeopardizing the funding for construction of the courthouse.

When it appeared that the dream for which her predecessors had worked so hard might not come to fruition, Judge Gonzalez worked tirelessly, shuttling back and forth to Washington, D.C., to fight for the

Gonzalez also finds the FBA invaluable as an avenue for continuing education. "I get more educated about the law by serving on panels and going to panel discussions," she said. "It is such a pleasure to have an organization like [the FBA] that has federal practice in mind." For this reason, Judge Gonzalez was a big supporter of the San Diego Chapter's first Judith N. Keep Federal Civil Practice Seminar in September 2005, which brought together the federal bench and the bar to discuss the key to being an effective litigator in federal court. Due to the success of the seminar, it is now an annual tradition.

Judge Gonzalez has also left a lasting impact on the community. For example, during her term as chief judge, she initiated the court's participation in the National Open Doors to the Federal Courts program in 2007, which is an educational program for high school students and teachers geared at enhancing public knowledge of federal courts. To this day, the court continues to participate in the national program. Under her leadership, the court also formed a Community Outreach Programs Committee to coordinate the court's outreach efforts and increase the court's interaction with the San Diego community.

Judge Gonzalez was also instrumental in the development and implementation of the court's Plan for the Representation of Pro Se Litigants in Civil Cases, which went into effect in late 2011. Under the plan, the court solicits applications from law firms and attorneys who are willing to serve on a pro bono panel to provide representation to indigent civil plaintiffs. The court and the San Diego Chapter of the Federal Bar Association then review the applications and compile a list of law firms and attorneys to participate on the pro bono panel. Under the plan, the assigned judge in a civil case filed by an indigent pro se litigant will determine whether the case is appropriate for the appointment of pro bono counsel, and if so, will appoint counsel from the pro bono panel. The program has proved to be indispensable for all involved. Pro se litigants, who are prosecuting cases that meet certain qualities demonstrating merit, are provided with a trained legal advocate at no charge, the court's resolution of these cases is much more efficient and orderly than is typical of cases tried by pro se litigants, and lawyers are given the opportunity to gain substantial experience practicing in federal court.

Even though Judge Gonzalez was able to accomplish so much during her tenure, her time as chief judge was not without its challenges. In addition to leading the court through several natural disasters affecting San Diego County, Judge Gonzalez was called upon to lead the court after three pipe bombs detonated at the front entry of the courthouse during the early morning hours of Sunday, May 4, 2008. Judge Gonzalez was praised by her colleagues as handling each and every emergency with grace without ever allowing the emergency to impede the



San Diego's downtown entertainment district is known as the "Gaslamp Quarter," named for the gas lamps that were common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The area is a Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places and includes 94 historic buildings.



construction funding. Although the design had to be scaled back, Judge Gonzalez succeeded in her effort to convince Congress to fund the project. Thanks to the tenacity of Judge Gonzalez, as well as her two predecessors, the dream of a new courthouse will finally be realized in December 2012 when the \$384 million, 16-story environmentally green complex opens its doors to the public ahead of schedule and on budget.

During her tenure as chief judge, Judge Gonzalez was also instrumental in bringing the court closer to the local bar, which she accomplished in part through her strong support of the San Diego Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. "I think it's important for litigants to get to know the judges and understand that we are human," Judge Gonzalez explains. "I also like to know the lawyers and who they are. It develops a collegiality like no other avenue." Judge

timely administration of justice.

Judge Gonzalez is the first to admit that her turn at chief judge was heavily influenced by both of her female predecessors. As she stated during the passing of the gavel ceremony, "I learned how to lead not only from my colleagues who have been there for me, but from ... those who preceded me. I watched and observed how they led. I watched how they tried to build consensus."

Judge Keep, who became the first female judge appointed to the district bench in San Diego in 1980, became the first female chief judge in the Southern District in 1991, shortly before Judge Gonzalez was appointed to the bench. Judge Gonzalez recalls how Judge Keep, who passed away in 2004, led the court with ease during a time when the district became the busiest in the country but saw no increase in judgeships to account for the increased case load. Judge Gonzalez specifically recalls how despite the court's struggle with its heavy docket, Judge Keep managed to foster a collegial culture amongst the district judges. "I observed how she ran the judges' meeting each week, and I never wanted to change that as part of our culture," Judge Gonzalez said. "I learned so much from her." To this day, Judge Gonzalez still carries a bench memo wherever she goes, a practice she first learned from Judge Keep.

In 1998, Judge Huff succeeded Judge Keep as chief judge. Knowing she was next in line, Judge Gonzalez paid close attention to how Judge Huff managed the position. Judge Huff's accomplishments were nothing short of extraordinary. During her tenure, Judge Huff, who is still an active member of the bench, successfully lobbied Congress to create five additional judgeships, increasing the size of the court by more than 60 percent. At the same time, she was overseeing the design and land acquisition for the San Diego courthouse and the construction and completion of a courthouse in Imperial County, which lies east of San Diego County. Judge Gonzalez laughs when she admits that she still envies how organized Judge Huff was as chief judge. "She could get so much done in a short period of time," Judge Gonzalez recalls. "When she was trying to get those judgeships, she was tenacious. She was amazing."

Judge Gonzalez's track record demonstrates that she succeeded in emulating both of her predecessors. Speaking at the passing of the gavel ceremony, Judge Moskowitz, Judge Gonzalez's successor, praised Judge Gonzalez's leadership. "Notwithstanding the more-than-usual changes to the court's makeup and technical operations, the ongoing construction of the massive federal courthouse complex, the seemingly endless disasters that impacted the court, and all the duties thrust upon her, Judge Gonzalez's warm and steady leadership minimized disruptions while making the chief judgeship look effortless," Judge Moskowitz stated. "To me she is an impossible act to follow."

Judge Gonzalez can only describe the occasion of passing the gavel as bittersweet. While she won't miss having the pressures that come with the position, she will miss having her finger on the pulse of the court. "Being chief judge gave me the opportunity to understand each of my colleagues, to learn



The San Diego Maritime Museum contains one of the world's best collections of historic ships, located on the docks downtown. This includes the famous *Star of India*, the world's oldest active ship, which is taken out for a sail once every year to maintain the "active" title. Other ships in the museum include those regularly seen in Hollywood movies, such as "*Master and Commander*" and "*Pirates of the Caribbean*".



how the judiciary works, and to work closely with the people who make this court run," she said. Hoping not to lose sight of those things she enjoyed as chief judge, Judge Gonzalez plans to continue her involvement in the FBA, including by serving as honorary co-chair of the FBA's 2012 Annual Meeting and Convention, which will be held this year in San Diego. She also plans to continue growing *Latinas in the Law*, an organization she helped start that is geared toward mentoring young Latina lawyers, law students, and young Latina women who are thinking about going to law school. "It has been a wonderful opportunity to talk to young women about the opportunities in the law," Gonzalez said.

When she isn't staying involved in the community, Judge Gonzalez, who plans on taking senior status next year, intends to travel and spend more time with her family, including her two young grandchildren who live on the East Coast. **TFL**

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