I serve as a law clerk to Hon. Robert Kressel, a bankruptcy judge in the District of Minnesota. My typical morning begins not at the federal courthouse but, instead, in an argument with my son, Dash. (He is four years old and very particular.) I try to accommodate with a stringent routine, but he sometimes throws me a curve ball just as we are about to walk out the door:

“I want to wear my suit.”
“Dash, today is pajama day. You have your pajamas on. We need to leave now.”

The crying begins.

“Look, Dash, if you wanted to wear your suit, you should have let me know earlier, we don’t have time to change right now. You can wear your suit tomorrow.”

Reasoning fails, the crying continues.

“OK! That’s it! We have to go or Daddy will be late for work.”

Inevitably, I manage to get out the door with barely enough time to get my two little ones to daycare. I then hustle to arrive in chambers by 8:30 a.m. By the time I get there, Judge Kressel has already been working for an hour and a half. A hot pot of coffee, from beans ground daily, awaits my arrival. I pour myself a cup and join Judge Kressel and his judicial assistant, Lynn Hennen, to begin the day.

To the casual observer, I’m sure it appears the three of us are simply engaged in a garden variety kibitzing session. Initially, this induced feelings of guilt when I reflected upon my terseness with Dash in my efforts to arrive on time … merely to drink coffee and chat. But, after nearly two years of clerking, I now realize how invaluable this daily meeting is to the smooth operation of Judge Kressel’s chambers. Our chambers’ relationships are strengthened through discussions of local legal and political news, upcoming hearings and trials, and Eighth Circuit developments. On most occasions, I’m the recipient of lessons about the Bankruptcy Code, district case law, and mentoring on how to be a successful lawyer. Sure, there is chitchat about the weekend and what happened last night on *The Big Bang Theory*, but serious business takes place. Most organizations would call this meeting an operations or update meeting. In Judge Kressel’s chambers, it is simply “coffee time.”

The Chambers Family

Coffee time is a common experience among former law clerks to the judge. The lessons learned are similar as well. Former clerk Rob Parish says that frequently, when he is faced with a legal question, he actually hears Judge Kressel ask, “What does the statute say?” It is a basic tenet of Judge Kressel’s legal purview that language is powerful and analysis always begins by reading the statute.

Another lesson is equally clear to anyone that has ever appeared before Judge Kressel. He believes rules and pro-
In the Beginning
pictures with the new citizens and their families. 1
stays for as long as it takes after the ceremony to pose for
of Zen—their newest grandson.
answer of “Everything!” to the question, “How much do
you know about bankruptcy law?” the judges of the District
of Minnesota saw it prudent to appoint Bob as the newest
bankruptcy judge in the district.
Judge Kressel was not always determined to study
the law. Upon graduation from Benilde High School in St.
Louis Park, Minn., he chose to major in mathematics at
the University of Notre Dame. This certainly explains why
conversations with and opinions authored by Judge Kressel
often contain mathematical terms and concepts such as
“nominal” and “infini-
tesimal.” Upon graduation,
however, Judge Kressel
decided that he didn’t want to
become a math professor.
So, he decided to study law
at Harvard Law School.
Between his 1L and
2L years, Judge Kressel
returned to the Twin Cit-
ties to clerk for his father’s
law firm. It was during this
summer that he met a legal
secretary working for his
father who would become
his partner in life: Chris Kerper. They married the following
summer before his 3L year and began a life together that
now includes two children, eight grandchildren, and plenty
of Zen—their newest grandson.

After nearly 30 years on the bench, Judge Kressel
retired in June 2012. He continues to sit a three-year recall
authorized by the Eighth Circuit Judicial Council. While he
is not leaving the bench just yet, this momentous occasion
serves as an opportunity to look back on Judge Kressel’s
remarkable journey.

In the Beginning
Way back in 1982, an attorney with the U.S. Trustee’s
Office had a meeting that he thought was sure to be the
pinnacle of his legal career. Robert J. Kressel was on his
way to meet with Chief Judge Miles Lord and the five other
districts of the U.S. District Court for the District of Min-
nesota and the topic of discussion was to be Bob Kressel.
Thankfully, not only for the judge’s career, but also for the
District of Minnesota and the world of bankruptcy, this
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—Lori A. Vosejpka,
former law clerk to
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but good people, who practiced law with honor and integ-
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on the bench.” As the current law clerk, I have an unofficial,
additional duty to organize a clerks’ dinner once a year
around the anniversary of Judge Kressel’s appointment
to the bench. Such a dinner was held this past December,
when the clerks gathered to reminisce, laugh, and honor
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The District Family

Not too long after his appointment, three new judges, who have been Judge Kressel’s colleagues for the majority of his career, were appointed in rapid succession. Judges Dennis D. O’Brien and Gregory F. Kishel were both appointed in 1984. In 1988, the district court appointed Judge Nancy C. Dreher. These four judges, representing a complete turnover of the bankruptcy bench and appointed in the span of six years, served the District of Minnesota together for 24 years. Each of them had a special relationship with the district’s “bankruptcy guru” and longtime chief deputy clerk, Raeder Larson. Judge Kressel and Raeder were part of a group that ushered the newly passed Bankruptcy Code into practice beginning in 1978. Judge Kressel considered Raeder a teacher, mentor, and friend. Raeder retired from the Clerk’s Office in 1994 and passed away in 1998. To this day, if you appear before Judge Kressel, you will see one of Raeder’s quirky clip-on ties peeking out from behind his black robe.

The four judges shared many weekends together at Judge Dreher’s cabin in Cable, Wisc. They cheered every milestone and felt each setback as their families grew, first with children and then with grandchildren. Each judge took at least one turn serving as the chief bankruptcy judge. In 2004, the bankruptcy judges for the District of Minnesota appointed the first woman to serve as the clerk of a federal court in the District of Minnesota: Lori A. Vosejpka, one of Judge Kressel’s former law clerks. It is rare today to spend your entire career with one organization; it is even rarer to spend your entire career with the same colleagues and friends. Lynn Hennen, Judge Kressel’s judicial assistant, has been with him for 26 years; his court recorder, Kathy Barksdale, 24 years; and his calendar clerk, Carrie Nordstrom, was with him for 21 years.

For the first time in a quarter of a century, the bankruptcy bench in Minnesota is turning over. Judge Dreher lost a lengthy battle with lung disease and passed away on Nov. 23, 2012. Judge O’Brien will retire this summer. By next fall, three new judges will be a part of the Minnesota bankruptcy bench. While he has never said as much, I personally believe that one of the reasons Judge Kressel is volunteering his time on recall is so he can “Raeder” the newly appointed judges. Hopefully, all three of them will take advantage of coffee time.

Endnotes
1The one exception: the largest naturalization ceremony in the history of the District of Minnesota, swearing in 1,509 new citizens. See www.startribune.com/local/minneapolis/169399466.html.
2Judge Kressel later had the honor of presiding over the marriage of his first law clerk, Jane Welch, and her husband Dan, and the marriage of his son and daughter-in-law, Ben and Jane.