

Judicial Profile

MONICA A. FENNELL

Hon. William C. Lee U.S. District Judge, Northern District of Indiana

A COMMITMENT TO improving the legal system and a willingness to learn have been hallmarks of Judge William C. Lee's career. Judge Lee doesn't shy from a challenge. Despite being more a member of the "Great Generation" than of "Generation X," Judge Lee has embraced technology as a means of increasing court efficiency and has devoted considerable time and energy to increasing pro bono representation for Hoosiers in need.

Judge Lee grew up in Fort Wayne, Ind., and returned there to practice law after graduating from Yale University and the University of Chicago Law School. "I did a lot of trial work right from the start," remarked Judge Lee. He enjoyed a distinguished career in public service, at the same time maintaining a private law practice. He served as deputy and chief deputy prosecuting attorney for Allen County and as U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Indiana. As a U.S. attorney, Judge Lee remembers organizing the first grand jury for a case involving illegal drugs in which more than 50 people were indicted.

Judge Lee was President Ronald Reagan's first appointee to the federal bench. He was appointed to the Northern District of Indiana in July 1981. Judge Lee recalls receiving a questionnaire that tried to pin down candidates, which, according to the judge, "was just the very beginning of some of the contentiousness" in judicial nominations.

When Judge Lee was appointed to the bench, he faced a court in Fort Wayne that had a "tremendous, overburdened caseload." Judge Lee attacked this docket with his usual vigor. Lawyers have commented that he has a "rocket docket." One of his biographical notes mentions that he has had one of the most current dockets of any federal court in the country.

Judge Lee has been active in leadership positions in the judiciary, serving on important judicial committees at the local and national level, including the Committee on Judicial Resources of the Judicial Conference of the United States, the Seventh Circuit Judicial Council, and the Seventh Circuit Pro Bono Committee. From 1997 to 2003, he served as chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Indiana.



Judge Lee has written and spoken extensively about trial practice and procedure, but he has not limited his writing to the law. For example, he wrote a church history entitled *Reaching Out: The First 150 Years of Trinity English Lutheran Church*. Judge Lee has been the recipient of many honors, including being named Indiana Trial Judge of the Year in 1988 and receiving Indiana's highest honor from the governor, the Sagamore of the Wabash award, in 2001. Among many other awards, he received an honorary doctor of laws degree from Huntington College in 1999.

In 2003, Judge Lee shifted to senior status, but he is far from retired. As a senior judge, Judge Lee could just enjoy retirement—and one of his favorite vacation spots in Florida—and accept fewer cases. Instead, he notes that he still carries a caseload that is more than half that of an active judge.

Although a senior judge, Judge Lee embraces technology and believes that it has raised the level of advocacy by allowing lawyers to spend more time on the substance of briefs. Judge Lee praised the lead-

ership of the director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts in this area and credits the Administrative Office with putting the federal courts on the forefront of technology and making the courts more efficient. According to Judge Lee, these advances “[have] really served courts’ purposes well.” Judge Lee saw the “technological revolution” begin 15 years ago and has seen the progression to a paperless court. “We produce a huge volume of orders—a thousand percent more than when I started but with the same number of people. ... Our productivity has skyrocketed.”

Technology has also been an important part of Judge Lee’s three-year tenure as chair of the Indiana Pro Bono Commission. As his term ends, Judge Lee reflects that the pro bono districts in Indiana are now “better equipped to improve,” are staffed better, and have “better technology to attack their mission more effectively.” Charles Dunlap, executive director of the Indiana Bar Foundation, praised Judge Lee’s leadership, noting that “the Indiana pro bono districts have reached a new level of organization and productivity. His focus on increasing attorney volunteers and ensuring that the districts have the resources to perform their mission were key components to his leadership.”

Judge Lee never expected to chair the Indiana Pro Bono Commission, but when the chief justice of Indiana, Randall T. Shepard, asked him to serve, he devoted his considerable energy to that task. As a federal judge, Judge Lee was not as familiar with the state court system and with all of the family law cases that are handled by Indiana’s attorney volunteers, but he made it his job to learn these systems. Judge Lee believes that it was—and remains—his professional responsibility to help those who cannot afford to hire an attorney. “Not only has Judge Lee been a tremendous leader in our court’s efforts to encourage the practicing bar to undertake pro bono work in Indiana,” observed Chief Justice Shepard, “but he has also been a strong advocate at our bar admissions ceremonies when we welcome the newest members of the bar into our profession. I have always found his remarks to be uplifting and inspiring. We have been lucky to have him on board.” Dunlap said, “Judge Lee’s willingness to devote countless hours leading the charge to bring awareness to pro bono [work] and increase the number of attorneys volunteering their services is truly selfless. He certainly leads by example.”

Working to increase access to justice and to improve the community is not new to Judge Lee. As a younger attorney in the late 1960s, he chaired the Legal Aid Society of Fort Wayne and also helped to found the Benjamin Harrison American Inns of Court, for which he served as its first president. Moreover, Judge Lee has served as president of several organizations crucial to the Fort Wayne community—the Board of Trustees of the Fort Wayne Community



Judge Lee in “Hello Dolly” at the Fort Wayne Civic Center. Photo by Gabriel Delobbe.

Schools, the Fort Wayne Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society. He has also served on numerous boards whose particular emphasis is on the arts and community service.

Judge Lee’s interest in music and theater is not merely as a board member or an audience member; he is also an active participant on stage. “I’ve been singing all my life,” remarks Judge Lee. “I sang in the church choir for 35 years.” Judge Lee has performed in many musicals and plays in Fort Wayne, including playing the Mikado in “The Mikado” at the First Presbyterian Theatre. “All Gilbert and Sullivan stuff is a lot of fun,” he says.

Judge Lee is married to Judith Bash Lee and has three children—Catherine, Mark, and Richard—as well as two grandchildren. **TFL**

Monica A. Fennell is the executive director of the Indiana Pro Bono Commission on leave as a Supreme Court Fellow.