

Judicial Profile

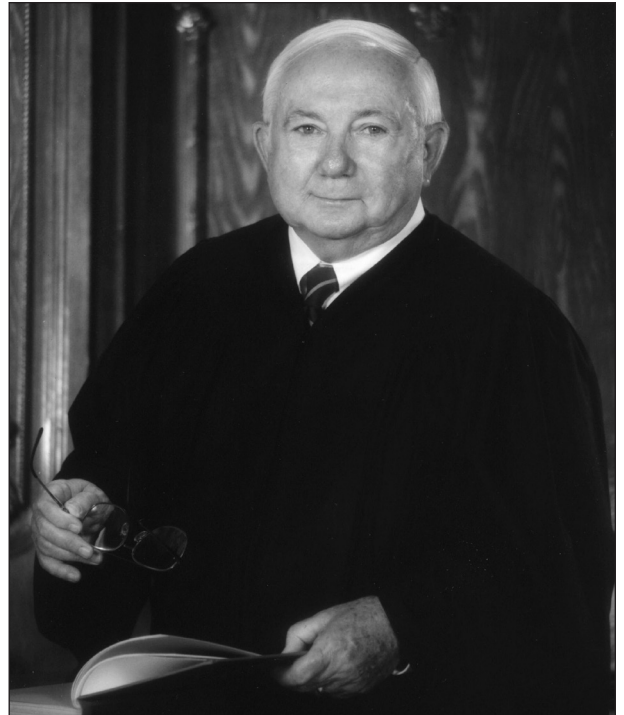
ELIZABETH RICCI

Hon. William H. Stafford Jr. Senior U.S. District Judge, Middle District of Florida

IT TOOK JUST one telephone call, and there I was talking to Senior District Judge William H. Stafford Jr., who, it turned out, lived up to his reputation as a jurist who is accessible, committed, and compassionate. The former chief judge, U.S. attorney, and state's attorney was generous with his time and made me feel completely at ease.

My prior dealings with Judge Stafford were limited to introductions at local bar meetings and through my Rotary Club. Although Judge Stafford was president of the Rotary Club when I was still in elementary school, by the time I joined I came to know him as an enthusiastic holiday bell ringer for the Salvation Army. Judge Stafford's reputation as a person who is committed and dedicated to various causes is not seasonal, however. He has spent most of his life in service; on active sea duty as a Navy officer in the Pacific and Caribbean for three years, as an assistant city attorney in Pensacola, Fla.; as an adjunct professor of law at Florida State University; and as both a state and a federal prosecutor. Since his appointment to the bench by President Gerald Ford in 1975, Judge Stafford has been a district judge and chief judge. He assumed senior status in 1996.

Raised and educated in Pennsylvania, the Temple University alumnus was a member and president of Sigma Phi Epsilon, whose telling motto is "building balanced leaders for the world's communities." Stafford was admitted to the Florida bar in 1961 and, prior to becoming a judge, he practiced in Pensacola, where he said the bar had about 100 members and where "lawyers could learn a lot, there were no sharp practices and nobody took advantage—judges made sure of that." He encourages today's practitioners to "mind their manners ... and do the things the [national] FBA expects of them." Stafford went from appearing before Judge Clarence W. Allgood Sr., a jurist since 1938, to becoming Judge Allgood's colleague and "darn good friend," from whom Stafford learned about politics and practice, including the importance of a citizen's need to have his or her issues heard. In



that spirit, Stafford has embraced technology, holding many hearings, including pretrials, by phone.

Although, as a senior judge, Stafford is considered officially retired, he currently maintains 31 percent of the caseload of a full-time district judge. Upon designation by the chief justice, Senior Judge Stafford also sits as an appellate judge for the First and Sixth Circuits annually.

The 76-year-old keeps busy in and out of the courtroom. He claims that he does not have as many hobbies as he should, but he enjoys walking, Florida State football, and reading. Stafford recently tackled *Quiet Strength*, a book written by Tony Dungy, a leading coach in the National Football League, and he plans to read Clarence Thomas' memoir as well as David McCullough's *1776: Illustrated Edition*, which he expects to enjoy with his six grandchildren, who know him and his wife of 48 years, Nancy, as "Pop and Gippy." Stafford resolves that, in 2008, he will become more active in the Rotary Club and will take up golf again; he also hopes to visit Mount Rushmore, Ireland, and Australia.

Renowned for his speaking skills, Judge Stafford

received the American Bar Association's Law Day U.S.A. Speech Award in 1994. Understandably, he considers the noted statesman, orator, and lawyer Daniel Webster to be an American hero. Stafford was the founding president of the Tallahassee Inn of Court, which was renamed for Stafford in 2003 by unanimous vote. Inns of Court are typically named after notable individuals who are deceased, but, according to David P. Carey, the executive director of American Inns of Court, such a naming during Stafford's lifetime is a "rare ... and considerable honor."

Stafford sat for a seven-year term (which included 9/11) as a judge on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, referred to as the FISA Court, based in Washington, D.C.—a court that oversees electronic surveillance and physical searches of individuals suspected of espionage and terrorism. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, Judge Stafford addressed the Tallahassee Bar Association, urging the judiciary and the legal profession to remain independent despite the threat to the "edifice of constitutional American liberty." During his speech Judge Stafford exclaimed that lawyers and judges are the "[g]uardians of ... the Constitution, the custodians of civilization under the rule of law."

In addition to his devotion to the rule of law, the senior judge is a devout Episcopalian, who not only has been a vestry member and lay eucharistic minister but also has held the position of senior warden, the highest lay office in an Episcopalian parish. He also has served on the standing committee of two dioceses, the standing committee being the council that provides advice to the bishop. As lifelong friend, former Chief of Florida's First District Court of Appeal Judge James Joanos noted that Stafford's "concern with God's word is as intense as his interest in man's law." And Stafford is extremely familiar with "God's word." When asked about his favorite biblical quote, he quickly recited Matthew 22:36–40 and explained that he loved the fact that, when a law-interpreting Pharisee asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Stafford also lamented the fact that "we often take ourselves too seriously and God not seriously enough."

Many of Judge Stafford's colleagues bring up other qualities that Judge Stafford displays, which are consistent with his reputation as a humble and compassionate human being; he is described as an admirable character, who knows something significant about everyone with whom he speaks, is genuinely concerned about others, and has a knack for names. At the presentation of his portrait at the U.S. Courthouse in 1996, Richard McFarlain, an attorney who is the

judge's longtime friend and admirer, described Judge Stafford as a "judicial purist who calls the close ones, and most of them are close ones, as the law and his conscience dictates. And who cannot admire that?" It was at this same ceremony that the mayor of Gulf Breeze, Fla., Lane Gilchrist, revealed that the judge's endearing nickname in the Pensacola bay area is "Dudley Do-Right." As Kay Judkins, his law clerk for almost 20 years, put it, the chief judge is a "[m]an who is committed to his family and friends, a man who tries to stay human and to show compassion while he exercises power over the fate and fortune of others [and] a man who has served his country well."

In a case of classic understatement, at his portrait ceremony Judge Stafford said, "When my epitaph is written I ask for only two words: He tried." Those who have known him personally and professionally would be unanimous in stating that he surely has succeeded. **TFL**

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