

Judicial Profile

ROSEMARY WUMMEL GARDEY

Hon. George Caram Steeh III U.S. District Judge, Eastern District of Michigan

WITH A FLASH of his infectious and ubiquitous smile, Judge Steeh breezes into his packed courtroom with a rush of his heels, his law clerk struggling to keep up and open court before this unassuming man, the first Arab American federal district judge in the Eastern District of Michigan, takes the bench before his presence may be formally announced, as he often does.

Exuding quiet confidence, Judge Steeh instills an informal congenial atmosphere in his stately courtroom, an atmosphere perhaps more common in Macomb County Circuit Court, where he served as a circuit judge for eight years from 1990 to 1998, until President Clinton appointed him as U.S. District judge for the Eastern District of Michigan on July 2, 1998. It is the creation of this relaxed atmosphere that not only fuels his widespread popularity among all facets of the federal bar, but also serves as a catalyst for uninhibited and thoughtful argument. Quite often, this casual but dignified setting assists in bringing about the amicable pretrial resolution of disputes, even when settlement appeared impossible.

No matter the color or creed of those appearing here, no matter what counsel clients may choose or have chosen for themselves, at whatever price or

none at all (if the federal defender's office, for example, is involved), all stand equal before the law in this courtroom — everybody. And this truth is well-known. So prevalent and well-founded is the belief that Judge Steeh is evenhanded, that it is not unusual for civil plaintiffs and defendants to waive their right to a jury trial. So strong is this man's reputation for fairness, that even those standing accused of crimes have waived a jury trial, despite Judge Steeh's reputation as a law-and-order judge and the continued support provided to him by the law enforcement community during his days as an elected circuit court judge.

Family Background

Judge Steeh is the second of five children and the first son born to Barbara Young and George C. Steeh Sr., for whom he was named. His father's parents, Dora and Caram Steeh, were Lebanese immigrants hailing from a small town in Turkey that was populated of Arabic Christians. Caram and Dora Steeh owned a clothing store in Mt. Clemens, Mich., and were the first retailers in the area to give equal treatment to African-Americans. Judge Steeh's secretary for nearly 20 years, Josephine Chaffee, remembers that years later when she helped the judge campaign for circuit judge, African-Americans were constantly telling him how much they liked the Steeh family, remembering how his grandparents had welcomed them to their store during a time of bitter segregation.

When Judge Steeh remembers his beloved mother, his eyes mist as he fondly recalls her tireless energy and how she was self-sacrificing to a fault. Before marrying his father, whom she met while he was an undergraduate at Michigan and she was home in Ann Arbor on a break, the judge's mother was a student at Carlton College, a distinguished liberal arts college in Minnesota. Marriage and children intervened before she completed her degree, but years later she graduated from Oakland University. She was well-loved in the community and known for her endless devotion to charity work. She volunteered on the school board, sang in the church choir, and gave aid to needy families and children. "She instilled in all of us a sense of the importance of public service," Judge Steeh says. Guests were common in the Steeh household and Barbara Steeh always made everyone



Judge Steeh at a Rose Bowl game cheering on his favorite team (Michigan, of course).

feel welcome.

Judge Steeh's father served in the state Legislature for eight years, from 1954 until 1962, when he retired as a state senator. Judge Steeh remembers how much fun it was handing out ceramic donkeys in his father's campaigns and attending endless summer picnics. During his Senate terms, Judge Steeh's father worked around-the-clock to fulfill the duties of his elected position, and to supplement his legislator's part-time salary by working at the law firm so that he could support his five children. He drove to Lansing on Monday afternoons for the legislative session that began that evening and returned home on Thursdays after the session was over. From Thursday night until Monday afternoon, he worked full days and evenings at his law office, but he managed to slip home for dinner every night, squeeze in a short nap, and then return to the office, where he worked until it was time for the 11 o'clock news. Life in the Steeh household was quite busy, but on Sunday nights the family gathered around the television with bowls full of popcorn to watch "Bonanza" and "Have Gun, Will Travel."

When the judge was in sixth grade, he followed his father to Lansing during Senate sessions to work as a page. He would pick up school assignments in Mt. Clemens on Monday and make the two-hour trek to Lansing with his dad, where he would perform his daily page tasks and run personal errands for legislators. As a page, Steeh enjoyed the chance to hang out with his father in his office and to watch with awe as he argued on the Senate floor. He dreamed of his own ambitions for a political career. At the ripe old age of 12, the judge lived in a rooming house, where he learned how to get along with all different kinds of people.

Growing up, there was never any doubt that Judge Steeh would follow in his father's footsteps and become a lawyer. "From the time he was a little guy, he was going to be a lawyer. At age 8 he said he was going to be a lawyer, and he never wavered," his sister Judy Steeh, a writer in Ann Arbor, recalls fondly. To that end, there was no question that he would be trained at his father's alma mater, the University of Michigan and its law school, for, in his eyes, it was the only institution of higher learning that existed. Michigan football dominated the lives of the five Steeh children. They would pile into the station wagon for the trek to Ann Arbor on game day, often getting student tickets for as little as a dollar, or waiting until half-time when admission was free.

Arab Heritage

Given that his grandparents were Lebanese immigrants, Judge Steeh especially enjoys conducting naturalization ceremonies, once traveling to the Detroit home of a 103-year-old Mexican immigrant to do so



and another time conducting a private ceremony for Sergei Federov so that the Red Wings forward could avoid publicity. When Judge Steeh took the federal bench in 1998, he began using his full middle name "Caram," rather than just the initial, to highlight his Lebanese background. Based on his judicial experience combined with his Lebanese heritage, Judge Steeh recently was invited to host a conference of Moroccan judges meeting in Rabat to assist in the current reform effort in that constitutional monarchy and former French protectorate. The project was funded through the U.S. State Department as part of the Global Rule of Law Initiative by International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) in Washington, D.C., which works to strengthen democratic institutions and governmental accountability around the world. Judge Steeh also serves as the president of the Arab-American Bar Association.

Early Career

After graduating from the University of Michigan Law School in 1973, Judge Steeh joined the Genessee County Prosecutor's Office in Flint, Mich. where he served as an assistant prosecutor for seven years, never losing a case. Judge Steeh remembers that time as one of great personal satisfaction because, "unlike private practice where as many times as not the client's objectives are not for the fairest result in the case, in the prosecutor's office you could strive for the best and fairest outcome. You could fashion an appropriate outcome through negotiation, or dismiss a case if you had any doubts, or refuse to bargain if somebody really had to be put away. In the prosecutor's office, it was not just about fashioning an outcome that served the victim and the community at

large, but finding a result that was best for the offender as well.”

While at the prosecutor’s office, the chief prosecutor, considered a radical liberal, was himself indicted for alleged embezzling. At the time, Judge Steeh, who highly esteemed and admired his boss, believed that the chief’s political enemies were behind the prosecution. When the prosecutor was eventually convicted and the evidence left little doubt of his guilt, Judge Steeh learned not to accept things at face value and gained a healthy, but never cynical, sense of skepticism. “We all have the potential for good and evil,” the judge reflects thoughtfully. “I recognize that those who have committed crimes are not all

that different than those of us who have not; we all have the potential to do wrong, and most criminals have the capacity to do right. So I treat everybody with the same respect, and those who have committed crimes deserve the same dignity.”

In 1980, Republican Governor Milliken reached out across party lines to appoint Judge Steeh’s father to the Macomb County District Court. His father continues to sit on that court as a visiting judge, even though he has reached the age of 81. The appointment left a hole in the three-attorney partnership of Neale, Steeh, and Hader, where his father had practiced for

years, and Judge Steeh left the prosecutor’s office to fill that void. At the law firm, Judge Steeh represented a wide spectrum of clients, from capital criminal defendants to family-owned businesses.

Although Judge Steeh once aspired to follow his father to the Legislature or even to run for governor, he grew disillusioned after the Watergate scandal. As political campaigns grew increasingly vicious and brutal personal attacks commonplace, he turned his attention to the judiciary, where he felt public respect remained and campaigns maintained civility. Remembering his rewarding days as an assistant prosecutor, he believed a judgeship, like the position of prosecutor, would allow him to work for fairness and justice. So when Macomb County opened a second district judge slot, Judge Steeh ran for the position, beat out eight other candidates in the primary election, and won the election by a 2–1 margin. From 1989 to

1990, anybody appearing in Macomb County District Court was before Judge Steeh, either senior or junior. While Judge Steeh and his father shared a docket, criminal defendants hoped for their case to be assigned to Judge Steeh’s father, for, although Judge Steeh considered himself quite lenient, he could never rival his father’s legendary reputation for merciful treatment. Judge Steeh remembers how he would plead with his father to sentence repeat drunk drivers to at least some prison time, but his father chided him for his “toughness.” Telling of the close bond between father and son, when his father celebrated his 80th birthday, Judge Steeh met with University of Michigan football coach Lloyd Carr and football legend Bo Schembechler to film a video message to mark the special occasion.

In 1990, Governor Blanchard picked Judge Steeh to fill a vacancy on the Macomb County Circuit Court, where he served until 1998, winning two elections, one in 1992 and another in 1995, when he was the top vote getter among seven competitors. He loved the challenge of planning and executing a campaign and the chance to meet with voters to talk about issues. While a circuit judge, he was well-regarded both for his intellectual abilities as a jurist and for his personal qualities. He was known then, as he is now, for exuding kindness and extending courtesies to the trial attorneys appearing before him. From his days at the law firm, he learned the vital role a judge could play in inspiring clients’ confidence in their own lawyers, which is so crucial to the pretrial resolution of disputes. In a poll released in 1995, *The Detroit News* rated him as one of the top judges, and in 1996, the *Detroit Free Press* published an investigative report finding him to be one of the least reversed judges on the bench.

Commitment to His Community

It is Judge Steeh’s continuing and persistent dedication to his fellow citizens, to his community, and to society as a whole that has driven his tireless devotion to so many charitable causes, most notably perhaps the March of Dimes, on which he has served on the board of directors for the past 10 years. He is a champion for the victims of domestic violence, women and children alike, having helped found the Child Advocacy Center and having served on the Macomb County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council. With humility rare in one so greatly accomplished, Judge Steeh has viewed his promotion to the role of federal judge as an opportunity to perpetuate a lifetime of public service.

Judicial Philosophy

Although Judge Steeh has an impressive track record of being affirmed by the Sixth Circuit on appeal, in deciding any given case before him his focus is not how his decision will be reviewed but how his decision will affect the parties appearing before him.



Judge Steeh at a March of Dimes annual Dinner Dance, of which he is master of ceremonies each year.

He is concerned with doing the right thing for the individual case in light of the existing law. He deeply respects precedent, but in doing so, he looks beyond the mere holding of a particular case and considers the decision in light of its historical context, its factual underpinnings, and the policy interests at stake. He has an open mind that allows him to understand competing and complex viewpoints and to arrive at creative solutions to problems, often finding a resolution that neither side proposed. When asked to describe his judicial philosophy, the judge responds: "My philosophy is not to have a philosophy, but to fairly decide individual questions that are presented and to work through issues in a neutral problem-solving way. Obviously, you need to evaluate the ultimate outcome in light of your basic sense of fairness, but I try to defer focusing on the actual outcome until I've worked through the entire analysis in a critical manner."

Federal Judgeship

After taking the bench in 1998, Judge Steeh has continued to serve the public with the same steady fairness and cordial nature that won him widespread popularity as a state judge. He is a true Democrat with a big heart, but he consistently approaches his cases with a level head and an open mind. One case stands out. A former hourly worker was told that he had enough seniority to retire, but after doing so, was told that a mistake had been made, and he was a few months shy of the 30 years needed for him to retire. The employee hired counsel from his small town, who lacked any experience in ERISA law and was not well-prepared to defend the matter, when the corporate defendant removed his "breach of contract" case to federal court. Despite the plaintiff's counsel's lack of experience, Judge Steeh was able to draw on his own knowledge of the law to bring about a fair resolution.

Not only do attorneys enjoy practicing before Judge Steeh, but his staff loves working for this upbeat man. Telling of the strong bonds he forges wherever he goes, in addition to his secretary of nearly two decades, Judge Steeh brought Mark A. Miller, a Macomb County Circuit Court research attorney for nearly a decade, to be his law clerk and he dragged longtime friend and former court reporter of eight years, 64-year-old Harold Henry, out of retirement to follow him to federal court. A host of interns from several law schools — including, of course, the judge's alma mater, the University of Michigan, as well as from local law schools, including Wayne State and the Detroit College of Law — have spent a semester in his chambers, and the judge carves out time to work with them personally on at least one project. Judge Steeh's advice to young lawyers is "do not be afraid to make changes in your work to find something you really enjoy doing. It is so easy to get trapped in work by the need to provide for your

family. But the importance of how you spend your days is so great, it does not make sense to waste time on work you don't like."

Interests

Besides being a longtime Michigan football fan and season ticket holder, Judge Steeh also enjoys travel, golf, and antiquing. Because his antiquing hobby has filled every cranny of his home and basement, his two chambers in Ann Arbor and Detroit are the recipients of an assortment of personal treasures and pictures. His Ann Arbor chambers serve as a shrine to the University of Michigan football team, showcasing such prized regalia as signed photographs of Heisman trophy winner Charles Woodson. Also displayed proudly is the judge's historic collection of radios and camels. In Detroit, his chamber's bookshelves are adorned with a collection of chrome toasters, all of which still work, and the walls are covered with an eclectic collection of pictures. Hon. Bernard Friedman, U.S. district judge for the Eastern District of Michigan, whose Detroit chambers are down the same corridor, cannot resist teasing Judge Steeh about the mirrored flamingo prints that grace the wall space over the drinking fountain.

Conclusion

No matter that Judge Steeh's commute from Mt. Clemens, his beloved hometown for most of his 53 years, to Ann Arbor may have stretched to three hours on a particular snowy morning, his brown eyes still sparkle with a youthful optimism, undeterred by a lifetime of experiences that might have led a lesser man to adopt the cynicism that has unfortunately become so prevalent in our society. Through his position as U.S. district judge, Steeh is giving society a reason to lose that cynicism and to adopt his cheery vision of reality. By his example of civility, diplomacy, and ultimate fairness, he is brightening the world around him and restoring people's faith in the integrity of the judicial system. He is one public servant who deserves and has rightfully earned the people's unwavering trust. The man's goodness radiates. You would have to be in his courtroom to believe it, but even those criminals he sentences for a very long time seem happy to be appearing before him and for good reason, too. TFL

Rosemary Wummel Gardey is an attorney in Miami. She clerked for Judge George Caram Steeh from 1998 to 2000.