



BenchMarks: Stephen Larson

**United States
District Judge**

by Ed Butler

Judge Stephen G. Larson is a locally raised, youthful achiever who savors his role as district judge of Eastern Division, U.S. District Court for the California Central District.

Having received special honors as a federal organized crime prosecutor, and after six years as Eastern Division magistrate judge, it took him only three months to be confirmed upon his nomination as district judge by President George W. Bush in late 2005.

Having just turned 43, Judge Larson has much on his plate to savor with seven young children and ongoing involvement in professional and community activities.

With a caseload that is about four-fifths civil and the rest criminal, Judge Larson says he especially enjoys working with parties in support of settlement. "I believe most disputes can be resolved by reasonable people" through negotiation, he says. He also enjoys "just seeing that justice is done, that the law is being applied as written, and that it is being applied fairly and equally to all."

Before his admission to the California Bar in 1989, he cut his teeth in the working world as a car salesman in Ontario and once considered a career in the U.S. foreign service.

The judge was born in Kaiser Hospital in Fontana, where his father worked in electrical maintenance in the tin mill at Kaiser Steel. His family was living in Ontario at the time, and he grew up the rest of the way in Upland, where his family moved when he was a pre-schooler. His grammar school was St. Joseph's, a parochial school there. He attended Damien High School, a boys' Catholic school in La Verne, where his mother later worked as librarian.

Judge Larson says he especially values his Catholic schools education for the moral and religious instruction "that played a big role in formation of my own values and religious understanding."

His big extra curricular interest as a youth was debate team at Damien. He also enjoyed miscellaneous sports, especially golf, which he took up in the sixth grade. He still plays golf occasionally.

When it came time for college, he opted for Georgetown University, across the country in the nation's capital. He also competed in debate there and participated

in Young Republicans. He earned a bachelor of science degree in foreign service.

He says his first paid job was selling new and used cars at Mark Christopher Chevrolet in Ontario. He started there the summer after finishing high school and continued during summers when he was home from college. He expresses appreciation for his hiring by late dealership owner Chuck Leggio, saying the experience taught him much about dealing with people and provided an introduction to the business world.

At Georgetown, he worked during the school year as speech coach at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, a school for girls. Also as an undergraduate he worked as a research assistant at the DC-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank.

Judge Larson says he did consider a foreign service career, but decided that changing countries of work location every three years would conflict with his goal of raising a family.

He says his attraction to the law as a career field developed in his undergraduate years, when he gained a growing understanding of the law's importance in influencing, regulating and bettering society. "I saw (the law) as a central component of civilized society and I wanted to be involved in the process of the law," he says.

He immediately enrolled in the University of Southern California Law Center and graduated in 1989, having participated in law review.

He spent his first two years as attorney as litigation associate at O'Melveny & Myers in Los Angeles. Cases he handled there included securities, intellectual property and general business litigation.

Next came his nine-year career as assistant U.S. attorney in Los Angeles, focused especially on the prosecution of organized crime. His success in that work led to receipt in 1996 of the Department of Justice Director's Award from Attorney General Janet Reno.

His main focal point in that office was suppression of organized criminals, Russian/Armenian immigrants, engaged in sophisticated crimes including complex fraud schemes, such as insurance fraud, and the lucrative evasion of excise tax on the sale of gasoline and diesel fuel. Judge Larson says this kind of crime arrived in 1993, right after the dissolution of the USSR and a resultant influx of Russian/Armenian immigrants. While most of the arrivals were law abiding, the criminal element came with them. Drawing upon his Russian language education at Georgetown, Judge Larson undertook to dismantle this gang activity, the sophistication of which he says reflects the strength of education of the Communist system from which the defendants came.

He recalls one of the biggest challenges of such prosecutions was the lack of trust in government exhibited by the law abiding

immigrant community, reflecting their Soviet-conditioned view of officialdom.

Immersion in this area of prosecution led to Judge Larson's becoming head of the organized crime division of the Los Angeles U.S. attorney's office.

Earning stripes there also led to his being chosen as magistrate judge by the Central District judges in mid-2000.

Explaining his attraction to the bench role, Judge Larson says he had developed profound respect for federal judges and felt comfortable in the courtroom. He admired the role of a judge, to act not as advocate but to provide a fair playing field.

He has made it clear that he prefers presiding as he does at Eastern Division, which serves Riverside and San Bernardino counties with its Riverside courthouse. Having grown up in Upland, "I guess I have a parochial interest in the Inland Empire," he says, enjoying "being able to be of service to your own community."

Reflecting this preference, he and his budding family relocated their home from Los Angeles to Upland in 1998.

While federal District Court funding is distributed equitably across the country, Judge Larson feels that Eastern Division could use the allocation of another district judgeship. That's because an overflow of Eastern Division cases has resulted in assignment of cases to the Los Angeles courthouse, posing a distance inconvenience for Inland Empire parties.

Noting that magistrate judges have the assigned job of resolving discovery disputes, Judge Larson says the professionalism of the local bar has kept such disputes to a minimum.

Asked to comment about the growth of the private judging movement, he expresses mixed feelings. On the one hand, it's valuable that retired judges can act as mediators in cases that might otherwise languish in court. However, he says he'd hate to see a dual track judicial system develop in which wealthier parties obtain more expeditious resolution because they can afford it, while the other track is for everyone else. It's important in a democracy "that everybody has access to the courts," he says.

As for hearing self represented litigants, he acknowledges that their position is a challenge for them. While lack of understanding of the rules of evidence and procedure puts them at a disadvantage, in federal court "we try to read the pleadings liberally that a pro se plaintiff brings." However, giving them the benefit of the doubt procedurally does not apply to adjudication of substantive law issues, in which all parties must be treated the same, he says.

Asked to state general advice or reminders for attorneys, Judge Larson first mentions preparation, knowing one's case thoroughly in terms of law and facts. He

notes that the judge is disregarding of law school prestige or bar exam score when it comes to this. Secondly, he emphasizes honesty or truthfulness on the part of an attorney. "Don't compromise your integrity," he advises. Thirdly, he asks that attorneys be kind, polite and civil in courtroom dealings with opposing counsel.

Asked to suggest good traits for a judge to have, Judge Larson cites appropriate demeanor, patience, understanding of the law and willingness to work hard to attain that. He gives special emphasis to "patience and a restrained demeanor."

Civility in the legal profession is an emphasis of the Inn of Court organization, of which Judge Larson is a board member of the local Leo Deegan chapter. He also is former president and current board member of the local Federal Bar Association chapter, and serves on the advisory board of the Volunteers on Parole mentor program.

He also finds time to teach, as adjunct professor, at the University of La Verne College of Law. He now teaches a class on civil rights and at other times teaches about federal courts and conflicts of law.

He also has lectured on crime in Russia, served as director of the Upland YMCA, and taught catechism at his church.

Judge Larson and his wife, Dena, a former federal investigator, are absorbed raising their four boys and three girls, who range in age from four months to 11 years old. The judge indicates that his family life is especially meaningful to him.

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