



Judicial Vignettes: San Bernardino County's Newest Superior Court Judges

by Ed Butler

When new judges are appointed, our field reporter, Ed Butler, Esq. interviews them and submits for your information, a "Judicial Vignette." These vignettes are added to our online collection of BenchMarks, a monthly feature in the Bar Bulletin.

Judge Stephan G. Saleson

After more than a quarter century in civil trial practice, new Judge Stephan G. Saleson felt ready for the community elder role of Superior Court judge of San Bernardino County.

Partner at Varner, Saleson and Brandt of Riverside, Judge Saleson was appointed judge by Gov. Schwarzenegger Feb. 1 and sworn into office March 1. Assigned to the bench at Victorville District, he handled mostly civil matters the first month before being scheduled to assume a regular criminal assignment there. He was appointed to the unexpired term of Judge Dennis Cole, who retired.

Judge Saleson's nearly 30-year career as advocate included representing Stater Brothers Markets, his main client, for 23 years in litigation matters. His partner, Bruce Varner, is general counsel for the chain.

Judge Saleson says since he was a child he's always had great respect for judges and felt it was one of the greatest callings in the legal field. He says he views it as an opportunity to give back to the community and draw upon his experience to decide matters and provide assistance and direction to people in the community.

He adds that the judicial role feels comfortable to him, after having served as the county's first small claims referee for six years at the former Colton Justice Court.

Judge Saleson was born in East Lansing, Michigan and his family soon moved to the Chicago area. (His father was a real estate developer.) He attended high school in Evanston, a Chicago suburb, where he lettered in football, baseball and wrestling. He also went out for football at university, first at the University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana, and then Michigan State University, where he obtained his bachelor's degree in international relations.

In between those schools he spent two years in the U.S. Marine Corps.

His side jobs along the way included delivery work for Saks Fifth Avenue.

He earned his juris doctor degree at Pepperdine University and was admitted to the California Bar in 1976.

His long lawyering history in San Bernardino County started with three years of miscellaneous prosecution as deputy district attorney. In 1980 he became a civil practice associate at San Bernardino's Gresham, Varner, Savage, Nolan and Tilden, and made partner with the firm in 1983. He transferred to its Riverside office in 1996, and in 1997 he and Varner split off to create their own firm.

Judge Saleson's girlfriend, Beth Soto, is a paralegal.

He reports his favorite pastimes include golf, travel and reading.

Judge Teresa (Snodgrass) Bennett

New Judge Teresa (Snodgrass) Bennett honed her legal skills with eight years in the capital crimes unit of the San Bernardino County public defender's office.

That was part of a 17-year career as a deputy public defender for the county, before her recent appointment to a vacancy on San Bernardino County Superior Court.

Sworn into office February 22nd, Judge Bennett has assumed a criminal bench assignment at Fontana District. She handles all facets of the criminal calendar for an assigned alphabetical range of defendants, by first letter of last name.

Judge Bennett says she enjoys the challenge of taking the judge's neutral point of view with an opportunity to make decisions to help effectuate justice. After working her entire advocate career in public criminal defense, she savored the chance to exercise the judge's decision-making role.

A Democrat residing in Upland, Judge Bennett fills the unexpired term of Judge Gus Skropos, who resigned last fall.

Judge Bennett was sworn into office by someone very special in her legal career, retired Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Paul Egly. She was working as his driver, taking him to private judging assignments and classes that he taught, when he encouraged her to follow her dream of becoming a lawyer.

The daughter of a salesman dad and nurse mom, Judge Bennett grew up in Orange County, first in Anaheim and then Irvine from eighth grade. She recalls having tomboy interests as a child, as most of the neighborhood children were boys. Their pursuits included whiffle ball, four square, and tether ball. At Mission Viejo High School, she participated in Girls Athletic

Association, in basketball, volleyball, softball and field hockey, and also acted in plays and belonged to French Club.

She majored in literature, with French emphasis, at UC San Diego. She spent her third undergraduate year in the UC Students Abroad program at Bordeaux, France. After graduation she spent two more years in Europe, studying further and working with a Christian organization.

Then followed 3 ½ years working at a medical hospital as a transcriber and receptionist in a speech and hearing clinic. She says her typing skill served her well there.

Then came a five-year period working for Judge Egly, including much of the time concurrently enrolled at night at the University of La Verne College of Law. While a law student she also clerked part-time for a personal injury attorney in Torrance and for the California Correctional Peace Officers Association.

She passed the Bar Exam in July 1988 and began the next year as a deputy public defender here.

Judge Bennett says eight years in the capital crimes unit offered the benefit of having more time to devote to each case, due to the gravity of such crimes, in terms of duration and amount of assigned caseload. However, she describes it as a daunting task to represent persons accused of such crimes.

Judge Bennett's husband, Robert, is a supervising social worker in the San Bernardino County Department of Aging and Adult Services. His duties there include supervision of elder abuse investigation.

Their daughter, Nicole, is in second grade.

Judge Bennett says her favorite pastimes include golf, travel, yoga, and attending dance class with her daughter.

SBCBA 2006-2007 Nominating Committee Announced

In compliance with the SBCBA By-Laws, the Nominating Committee for the 2006-2007 term is:

Wilfred J. Schneider - Past President

Penny Alexander-Kelley - President

J. Byron Streiffing - President-Elect

Thomas Garza - Garza & Garza

Elizabeth McDonough - Althouse & McDonough

Bar members are encouraged to submit names of prospective nominees to any Nominating Committee member for its consideration.