

The Providence Journal – “Sensitivity to mental illness was the hallmark of retiring Judge Stephen Erickson”

By Katie Mulvaney

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Sensitivity to mental illness was the hallmark of retiring Judge Stephen Erickson

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Heading upstairs to the bench in District Court, South Kingstown, Judge Stephen Erickson will step down later this week after 20 years. He will be missed by members of the behavioral health community.

The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

MIDDLETOWN — District Court Judge Stephen P. Erickson can spot a defendant struggling with mental illness across a courtroom. He is attuned to individuals trying to ease their battles with alcohol or drugs. He encourages, and hectors, people coming before him to comply with their treatment regimens or be sent to jail. He discusses their diagnoses and medications with familiarity, and patience.

District Court judges come face-to-face daily with the challenges confronting people with mental illness, drug addiction and alcoholism. They witness firsthand how, without proper treatment, defendants find themselves in cycles that land them in and out of courtrooms and prison, perhaps for a lifetime.

Erickson has cultivated a particular interest in mental-health issues during his 20 years on the District Court bench, an interest driven in large part by his wife Bonnie's own collapse a decade ago.

"When you see something for the first time, suddenly you see it everywhere," Erickson says.

Erickson feels so strongly about the subject that he plans to continue pursuing it even after he retires July 30. He would like to see mental health, substance abuse, and housing assistance services as well as diversion programs in every courthouse across every court.

"For the mentally ill, life is horrible," Erickson said one June morning after hearing more than three dozen cases in District Court, South Kingstown. "Mental illness does not excuse. It explains."

For Judge Erickson, it's personal.

Bonnie Erickson, 58, earned an MBA and a master's in accounting from the University of Rhode Island, where the couple met as undergrads in 1970. She took her exam to become a certified public accountant while six months pregnant with their second child, Scott.

Bonnie found success in the business world, where she worked in auditing and risk management for Pricewaterhouse, Textron and other Fortune 500 companies. Her work at times took her to Asia for months to oversee projects.

About 10 years ago, their lives changed. She started experiencing serious migraines, depression and anxiety. Then she could no longer work. She was confined to bed, with her husband serving as caregiver. Her mother later moved to Rhode Island to help make sure Bonnie didn't harm herself.

"You work through it," Erickson said. "You become a caregiver or you don't."

Bonnie remarked that one of her husband's strengths is loyalty, even when faced with adversity. "I couldn't get rid of him if I tried."

The Ericksons spoke of their experiences on a recent afternoon at their home in Middletown. Tucked in a wooded corner, the cedar-shingled house sits within earshot of the ocean. It is quiet except for the chirping of birds outside and the antics of two house cats anxious to be fed.

Bonnie had just risen from a nap. Earlier that day she had her hair styled at a salon in Portsmouth and it hung in a glossy, dark bob about her head. It was the first time she had left the house in two months due to an intractable migraine. Fine lines etched her forehead, a sign, Judge Erickson

said, that his wife is still in pain despite the lively conversation. She is skilled, he said, at masking discomfort.

Conversation jumped from reading books on their iPads to his hobby, building delicate and incredibly detailed model railroad sets, to the struggles they have faced and his imminent retirement. They are Arlo Guthrie and James Taylor fans who clearly enjoy intellectual sparring.

They attribute Bonnie's difficulties to chemical imbalance and environmental factors, such as work stress. Initially, she didn't even recognize she was experiencing depression. "What's depressed?" she said. "I didn't have an understanding of what was going on."

She left her job, to her husband's disappointment, and tried to work as a consultant, only to find that too much to bear. She was ultimately diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

"I could not work anymore," she said. "I wasn't lazy... I never had trouble doing anything." Today, she recognizes that she's been prone to highs and lows throughout her life.

In Erickson's eyes she is the smartest person he's ever met. He jokes that he's the least intelligent in their family, ranking behind his wife, son and daughter.

About two years ago, doctors implanted a vagus nerve stimulator under the skin in her upper chest. About the size of a pocket watch, the device is used to treat major depression, migraines and epilepsy by sending electrical impulses to the vagus nerve, or mood center.

The Ericksons have been satisfied with the results. The only outward evidence of the stimulator is that Bonnie's voice grows hoarse every three minutes as the impulse travels close to her larynx on its way to the vagus nerve.

They are optimistic about the future, though doctors recently diagnosed Bonnie with diabetes — a blow that casts a cloud over her face when she mentions it. Even so, Judge Erickson talks about the tough times as a thing of the past.

"We got through all that and it taught me a lot," Erickson said. "You don't enjoy going through it, but it gave me a better understanding of people in front of me. I do have a good eye for spotting problems."

Erickson gets a chance to put those skills to work almost every day on the bench. On a Friday morning in June, his courtroom at the McGrath Judicial Complex in South Kingstown was filled to standing room only. The mood was tense as people stood wedged against each other as Erickson read through the calendar call. The room was warm. The stale odor of alcohol and cigarettes permeated the air.

A Block Island woman jailed for violating a no contact order came before him. "You're very lucky you've got support," Erickson said to the woman, who stood blank-faced before him, her sister and a mental-health professional at her side. "You've got to do your part for full compliance [with your treatment]."

“I think you can do this. Everybody thinks you’re ready to do this,” he said.

He asked another woman, facing three misdemeanor charges, how she was adjusting to her medications. She thanked him for asking and burst into tears as she told him she was benefiting from the counseling. She had realized she needed it. Her goal, she vowed, was to get better, anything to get her son back.

“You’re making good progress,” Erickson said.

Erickson ordered a medical evaluation for a 73-year-old URI professor accused of assaulting his wife. Throughout the morning he coached, prodded and warned defendants about the consequences of breaking a promise to a judge. After watching his wife’s difficulties, he is sensitive to people who stop taking medication because of side effects.

“I try to tailor the response to the person I am seeing,” Erickson said.

Now less than a week from retirement, Erickson, 59, recalls defendants who told him years later that he had saved their lives. There was the man with a fetish who got caught shoplifting women’s lingerie, and the woman he sentenced for filing a false police report after she recanted her allegation that her boyfriend had assaulted her. His words, he said, made her realize she was in an abusive relationship and could end up dead.

“That’s what I will miss most, coming home and feeling like I made a difference in people’s lives,” Erickson said.

He will be missed by experts in the behavioral health community, where he is a standout for his interest in mental-health issues.

“He’s just a champion,” said David Lauterbach, the president and CEO of The Kent Center in Warwick. “He really has taken the pains to educate himself.”

Erickson was integrally involved in launching a clinical program in District Court, Warwick, a little over a decade ago. Under that initiative, a clinician from The Kent Center evaluates the mental fitness of defendants. The aim is to assist the court in distinguishing when an individual’s conduct was spurred by a mental-health issue or truly criminal intent. The court can then tailor the punishment to fit the individual, perhaps imposing treatment instead of prison.

“I really think he recognizes he’s dealing with human beings,” Lauterbach said.

Erickson was nominated to a District Court judgeship in 1990 by then Gov. Edward DiPrete. Prior to that, he was DiPrete’s director of legislative affairs for four years. He served four terms as a Republican state representative, representing parts of Aquidneck Island from 1978 to 1986.

Retirement, he said, was always Plan B “if other things didn’t work out.” [Governor Carcieri](#) this spring passed him over to become the chief judge of District Court, picking Judge Jeanne E. LaFazia to lead the court instead.

“I didn’t want to finish my career doing the same thing,” he said.

He declines to say exactly what he has planned next, other than writing a District Court bench manual and a book to assist people in maneuvering through Rhode Island’s mental-health system. But, he said, he remains dedicated to public service.

“I view it as a transition, not as a retirement,” Erickson said. “I figure I have 20 years ahead of me.”

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