

Orange County Trial Judge Takes Helm of National Association of Jurists

SANTA ANA - Orange County Superior Court Judge Tam Nomoto Schumann discovered the American Judges Association in 2002 and by the next year, she was on its board.

This month, Schumann took over as president of the AJA, the largest national judges organization in the country.

"I was just so impressed with the judges," she said about her first contact with the group. "They were just so warm in their welcome."

The association numbers more than 3,000 members from all levels of the judiciary and from most countries in North America. Canadian judges are particularly enthusiastic these days, Schumann noted.

Even at her first meeting, she found it "fascinating" to hear judges' "different ways of looking at and different ways of solving the same issues."

Schumann took office as president at the group's annual conference earlier this month in Hawaii. She turns the reins over to the next president in a year at the conference in Las Vegas.

In between, Schumann said she hopes to pull together and publish an AJA "white paper" on judicial wellness and stress. The goal is to gain a better understanding of how judges are coping with the demands of their jobs, what aspects of being on the bench are most stressful and what methods might be used to help ease the stress.

Given the state of the economy, she said, stress on judges must be increasing if only because stress on the public and litigants is increasing.

"I have seen my civil calendar at least double from foreclosures," said Schumann, who sits at Orange County's North Justice Center in Fullerton.

"Of course, that's going to take more from us [judges] ... listening to them." One big change many courts are already trying to cope with is the increase in litigants representing themselves in court. Those numbers will only go up as the economy goes down.

In fact, last year the American Judges Association issued its first white paper on self-represented litigants, Schumann said.

The study she has launched will gather information from surveys, other research and other programs. AJA has connected with researchers, including bringing in a graduate student to keep things running, Schumann said.

The judge said the study also will gather information from the National Center for State Courts, the National Association for Court Management, the National Association of Court Reporters and the Conference of State Court Administrators, including surveying members.

When completed in a year, the white paper will be given to the other organizations and to court administrative arms, such as California's Administrative Office of the Courts, Schumann said.

The work is important, the judge added. Helping judges stay healthy and cope with stress will make them better judges.

"In order to be kind to others, I think you've got to start by being kind to yourselves," she said.

Schumann has been on the Orange County bench since 1979, appointed as a Municipal Court judge in Santa Ana in 1979. She was elected to the Superior Court in 1997.

The American Judges Association began in 1959 as the National Association of Municipal Judges, but it changed its name in 1973 as more judges from various courts joined. It has been especially active in judicial education, including launching the American Academy of Judicial Education in conjunction with the American Judicature Society.

NEW NEUTRAL -Retired Justice William D. Stein of the 1st District Court of Appeal has joined ADR Services.

Stein, 67, who retired Aug. 31 after 24 years on the bench, will work out of the provider's San Francisco office. He will handle mediations, arbitrations and discovery.

Stein, a 1965 graduate of Hastings College of the Law, started his law career at the state attorney general's office in 1965, working his way up to an appellate specialist and arguing several cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

He was chief assistant attorney general in charge of the criminal division when Gov. George Deukmejian appointed him to San Francisco Municipal Court in 1984. The governor elevated him to the Superior Court the following year and the appellate court in 1988.

CHANGES AT THE TOP - The judges of the Ventura County Superior Court have elected Judge Kevin J. McGee as presiding judge and Judge Vincent J. O'Neill Jr. as assistant presiding judge for 2009-10.

The election took place Aug. 27. The new terms for each begins Jan. 1.

McGee, 55, has served as assistant presiding judge for the past two years. He was elected to the court in November 1998. Prior to that, he was a member of the Ventura County district attorney's office for 16 years, serving as chief assistant district attorney from 1994-98.

O'Neill, 56, also a former county prosecutor, was appointed by Gov. Pete Wilson to Ventura County Municipal Court in 1992 and elevated to the Superior Court three years later. He was with the Ventura County district attorney's office for 12 years, the last eight as chief deputy district attorney. Before that, he spent two years in the criminal division of the attorney general's office in Los Angeles.

JUDGE INSTALLED - Ventura County Superior Court Presiding Judge Colleen Toy White administered the oath of office Monday to Judge Gay Conroy during an installation ceremony at the Hall of Justice.

Conroy, 65, was appointed a judge by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger July 21, after two years as a commissioner.

In her more than 20 years in practice before taking the bench, Conroy was a sole practitioner, a partner with a Ventura law firm, a family-law facilitator and a mediator.

- Don J. DeBenedictis and Pat Alston

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