

The Rundown Volume 6

Hello,

This is the sixth release of the Rundown, a series of broadcasts aimed at explaining some of what the American Judges Association (AJA), and I as your president, do on behalf of the members of the Association.

This issue of the rundown is not really about the AJA and what it does, but rather, it is about you. In the January issue of Court Review I wrote about the problem of judicial stress and its impact on sitting judges. (If you're interested in that column click the following link: aja.ncsc.dni.us/publications/courtrv/cr51-1/CR51-1PresCol.pdf.)

At the beginning of the column I mentioned that my blood pressure fell more than 30 points in the three weeks after I retired from the bench. The drop was so significant that my doctor took me off the blood pressure medication that I'd been on for more than a year. Six months later it is still in the low normal range. So, I'd like to return to the topic of judicial stress as I think it's important to every sitting judge.

In examining the question, I have found a lot of discussion of but, other than the two studies that I cited in Court Review, almost no research into the subject of judicial stress. One thing however that emerges almost as a refrain is the sense of judicial isolation. While judges share the visibility of other government officials they, unlike the others, are subject to restrictions both formal and informal, limiting how they share the decision-making. A governor or representative, in making a decision, can contact a wide range of individuals whereas a judge is supposed to make the decision alone. Lawyers who were once friends must now be kept at arms' length, and non-lawyers have difficulty comprehending the way in which the judiciary works.

This sense of isolation is a major contributor to judicial stress. When combined with heavy workloads, restrictions on public speech and behavior, and widespread public ignorance about the judiciary, a judge can feel besieged. Yet, judges as a group, tend to be in denial about the impact of the stress.

The truth is your job is stressful, but what can you do about it? There are many options, like exercise, meditation, hobbies, and even counseling, but for the moment I like to focus on one simple option: Take a vacation. Take a real vacation, at least a week, two would be better. Don't pretend you don't have the time, you do and what's more you need to take the time.

Recently, my wife Karen and I decided that she needed a break from her job as an executive director of a nonprofit and so joined a number of friends on a whitewater rafting trip at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. There were 26 people on the trip, most of them professionals, with jobs that required constant communication. We all went through some form of withdrawal the morning when our plane landed at the Bar 10 Ranch and we discovered that there was no cellular or Wi-Fi service available. It took about a half day for people to stop pulling out their phones looking for some way to connect, but soon people began to unplug.

A growing sense of relaxation was helped by the incredible beauty of the Grand Canyon and by the joy of running the rapids on the Colorado River. There was a constant look of amazement on people's faces at each bend in the canyon or as they watched stars so thick in the sky that



they seemed to form clouds. Our four guides from Colorado River and Trails Expedition helped civilize the wilderness by making sure we got wet in the rapids and ate well. In the end, all of us came off the river in need of a shower and more relaxed than we had been in some time. Of course it didn't take long for all of us to plug back in, but it appeared to me that each of us had been refreshed.

I'm not suggesting that every judge needs to go on a whitewater rapids trip down the Grand Canyon, but rather, that you should take a vacation, a nonworking vacation. Don't look at your phone, iPad or computer, in other words unplug. You will be happy you did and you come back better able to face the daily stress of your job.

That is it for now. I hope to write again soon.
Thanks and be well. Brian