



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Judge Heather Morse's days as the sole Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge in South County are over for now.

Judge leaves Watsonville with fond memories

By **DONNA JONES**
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WATSONVILLE — Commending him for coming forward, Judge Heather Morse granted an extension to a man who skipped out on a fine years ago, but now, in his mid-30s with a family, had turned himself in to clear up the matter.

She also urged an elderly man who had recently completed a substance-abuse treatment program to get a good meal and take care of himself.

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JUDGE
HEATHER
MORSE

For the past four years, Morse hasn't just handed down judgments. She's touched lives in the community, whether working with drug addicts, encouraging offenders to take more positive paths, helping troubled youth or celebrating weddings.

But her days as the sole Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge in South County are over for now, and the two men she talked to Thursday were among her final cases in Watsonville.

Morse is moving to Santa Cruz, where she starts a new job in court administration Monday. She said she will miss the Freedom Boulevard court.

"You see people at every stage of life," Morse said. "And if you live here, like I do, you see them in the grocery store and at community events."

A former prosecutor, Morse, 50, was appointed to the bench in

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1989, the county's first female judge.

Of average build and height, with dark hair that falls just short of her shoulders, it's Morse's animated personality that captures attention. She communicates her enthusiasm for the job with words and phrases like "fantastic" and "it's a blast."

She has served three stints in Watsonville, part of a regular court rotation that shifts judicial assignments throughout the county. As a South County resident, Morse said she has a particular fondness for the Watsonville court and community.

After stepping down from the bench Thursday, she hugged court staff and lawyers: "The whole thing here is working with a team. It's been a real pleasure everyday to come to work."

Morse's team approach extended beyond the courtroom to include schools, treatment programs, social service agencies and law enforcement, and those who have worked with her say she has had an impact on the community

and will be missed.

"She allows herself to not only be a judge but also a human being," said Police Chief Terry Medina.

During the past four years, Morse helped establish a juvenile drug court at the Freedom Boulevard facility, worked to get chronic truants to attend classes and advocated for the plan to make expanded court services part of the city's Civic Center project on the 200 block of Main Street.

Working with the Pajaro Valley Unified School District on truancy issues was one of the most enjoyable parts of her tenure, Morse said. In June 2001, invoking a rarely used law for the first time in the county, Morse suspended the driving privileges of four teens who missed as many as a third of their classes.

Having the judge's support bolstered the school district's efforts to keep students from skipping school because it showed teens what they have to lose, said Ron Kinninger, district truancy manager.

"Not too many people are willing to touch (truancy) in the legal system since it takes a lot of time," Kinninger said.

Morse also worked with young

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LINDA PEREZ,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
PAJARO VALLEY PREVENTION
AND STUDENT ASSISTANCE

drug offenders after the county won a grant late last year to develop a program that combines criminal justice, treatment and academic guidance.

Linda Perez, executive director of Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, has worked with Morse through the juvenile court. The judge has a way of helping parents take back their role, and supporting their efforts, she said.

"She's just very firm, very clear, very warm and has a great sense of humor," Perez said.

Then there are the weddings. Perez said she couldn't count the number of times Morse took a break from proceedings for a marriage ceremony, but she recalled one instance.

"She took time with the wedding

couple and acknowledged the parents and asked who they were," Perez said. "She recognizes it's a special time for people. It's in the midst of the Watsonville court, but it's special."

Morse said as much as she enjoyed the work inside the courtroom, she's most pleased that the county and city reached a final agreement on new court facilities during her term.

The Civic Center project includes three courtrooms and a hearing room. When complete, in 2007, residents will no longer have to travel to Santa Cruz to take care of most legal matters, she said.

"It was a huge cooperative effort," Morse said. "It's something that's going to serve the community for years and years to come."

Thursday, Morse vowed to return to Watsonville when construction is finished and her North County rotation is done. Bidding farewell to her "team," she added "until we get back together again in the new building."

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