

Sam Stevens: Closing the case as a judge

By CATHY KELLY

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

Sam Stevens retires this week after presiding over Santa Cruz County Superior Court cases for just shy of 20 years.

But he says he will leave the heartbreaking stories he heard as a judge behind, and the decisions he made, an essential survivor tool he learned early on.

Stevens, 63, was appointed by Republican Gov. George Deukmejian in 1989 to fill a vacancy

SANTA CRUZ created by the elevation of Chris Cottle to the 6th District Court of Appeals. Stevens was a civil attorney, then, and a Democrat, and his appointment came as somewhat of a surprise.

One of 10 Santa Cruz Superior Court judges, he went on to serve three six-year terms, unopposed. His seat will be filled by prosecutor Ariadne Symons, who was elected by voters in June.

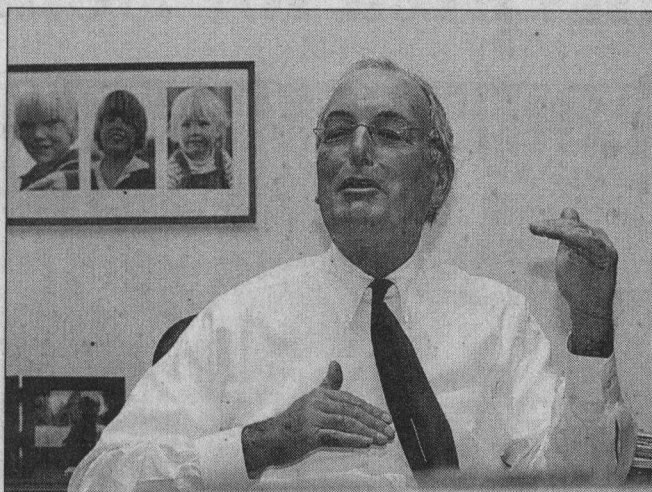
Presiding Judge Robert Attack said Stevens will be missed.

"Sam Stevens is an extremely hard-working judge who gives us a great deal of flexibility," Attack said. "He is able to do civil, criminal, probate and family law cases with ease."

Stevens said the civil cases are the most challenging intellectually, and that fatal drunken-driving cases are the most difficult criminal cases.

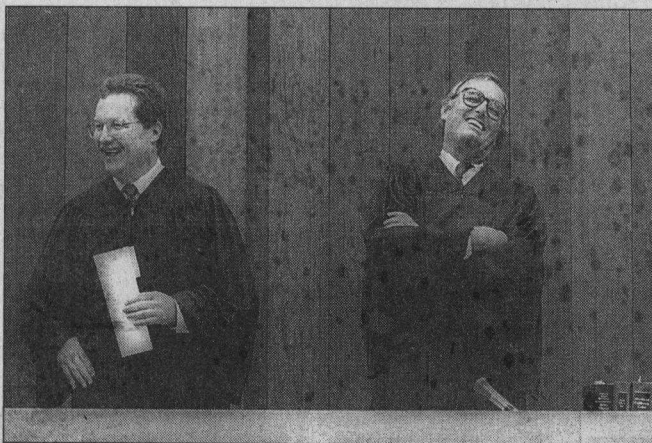
"Those are clearly the worst; when otherwise upstanding citizens have a bad day, get drunk and get behind the wheel," he said. "Especially when there is a passenger involved, a passenger who probably knew they shouldn't get in the car, but did. How do you determine the culpability?"

Stevens has handled several high-profile criminal cases, including the Badgett brothers



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Judge Sam Stevens recounts some of the memorable moments of his 20 years on the bench.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Judge Tom Black razzes Sam Stevens at Steven's investiture.

murder case. In 1991, Chris and John Badgett were convicted of butchering their former best friend, 19-year-old Michael Palmer, and dumping his remains in several parts of the county.

The case involved several legal issues, including alleged coerced testimony by Chris Badgett's common-law wife, and whether discussions between

the two were confidential. The convictions were reversed by the 6th District Court of Appeals and later upheld by the state Supreme Court.

More recently, Stevens decided a civil suit filed against the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency over a 2003 rate hike; a hike some farmers sought to have characterized as a tax.

Stevens said the case involved 10 complex issues, and that one of his decisions was reversed.

Sentencing laws stiffened significantly during his tenure, Stevens said, and part of his work became making sure that prosecutors were supervised and defendants were not sent to prison when that was not appropriate. He said he was known as a bad judge for a defendant to draw on a case involving a gun, as he is intolerant of guns.

All that is soon behind him, though, in a retirement he said has been "penciled out" for years and one that brings mixed feelings.

"I enjoy it here; it's fun," he said. "And it's tough to realize it's time to retire; time to let go and recognize that you're hardly indispensable. There's always a little ego involved."

But Stevens said that ego was not stoked that much by Santa Cruzans, who tended to treat him more like a normal guy than some lofty jurist.

In retirement, Stevens plans to work part time as a mediator and spend more time with his wife, Tamy, and grandson, William. The couple is raising 6-year-old William after the recent death of his father, William.

Stevens' first wife, Jane, died in 2004. His second wife was a court reporter, and the two met in the courtroom, he said.

Stevens has two children; daughter Jesse and son Charlie, a Santa Cruz criminal defense attorney, and four grandchildren.

He is a runner, and a hardcore San Francisco Giants fan.

And, he said, he knows it's time to move on.

"I'm feeling good," he said.

Contact Cathy Kelly at 429-2436 or jcopeland@santacruzsentinel.com.