

Aptos appellate judge retires after 34 years on the bench

Richard McAdams founded Senior Citizens Legal Services; other programs

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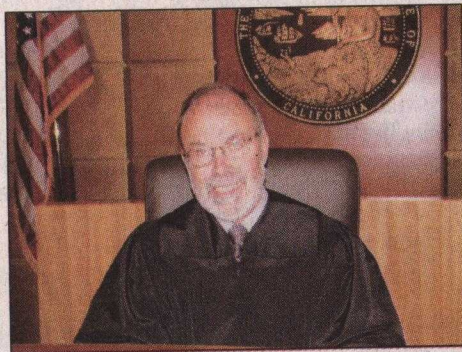
SANTA CRUZ — Justice Richard McAdams has had some interesting characters traipse through his courtroom during 26 years in Santa Cruz before being elevated to the 6th District Court of Appeals — from Trailside Killer David Carpenter to five men convicted for one of the county's first gang slayings, the horrific 1979 Mount Madonna murders of three young men, to musician Huey Lewis, accused of firing a gun inside an Aptos bar.

But that is not what he focuses on when talking about his retirement.

The 67-year-old Aptos resident retires Monday. He was appointed to the appeals court in 2003 by then-Gov. Gray Davis and served 26 years on the bench in Santa Cruz.

An outgoing, funny man, he does talk about Senior Citizens Legal Services, a nonprofit he founded in 1972 while working at Legal Aid. And he founded other groups which still exist, including the Domestic Violence Commission (Christine McGuire was a key figure, too, he says) and a courtroom decorum group now called the Professional Relations Committee.

McAdams says he has appreciated his current appeals court work, which allows shaping of law. He says his wife nailed it when she called it a "think tank."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Judge Richard McAdams of Aptos will retire Monday after 26 years in Santa Cruz before being elevated to the 6th District Court of Appeals.

But it seems to be the people's lives he has impacted that bring him the most satisfaction — from the young attorneys he has mentored recently to those accused of minor crimes whose fate he decided in his early days. They had "slipped up," he said, but were not in too deep and not so hardened they wouldn't listen to the judge.

They approach him in the market and other places all the time, he said, telling him he helped them turn their lives around.

"I take no credit," he said.

At one point, McAdams began meeting with youth convicted of driving under the influence.

"Many had no one in their life even remotely resembling a mentor," he said. "I wanted them to know there were people who

SEE JUDGE ON B6

JUDGE

Continued from B1

cared about them."

He calls his four years running family court the most challenging emotionally.

"You can have a tremendous impact by how you handle cases and people and how you insist they behave toward one another," McAdams said. "It takes some creativity to get parents to focus on the children and to intervene in domestic violence cases."

McAdams has been married for 45 years; the couple have two daughters and six grandchildren.

His wife, Claire, helped start Senior Citizens Legal Services, he said, and helped convert him to Catholicism when he was 18. Long a rock guitarist, he would joke with her about how bad the music was during Mass. One day, she sent him to meet a young seminarian who was looking for a guitar player, and McAdams has played at Mass ever since, now at Resurrection Church.

His family warns him he will have to give up his authoritarian ways, he said, laughing, and loves to point out that people won't be standing up when he comes into a room anymore.

McAdams has been around so long he remembers when the Santa Cruz courthouse had no real security system and news cameras were not yet allowed in the courtroom (that changed in 1981). He said he spent most of his time hearing civil cases, and said that assignment required the most homework.

McAdams said he has always taken a long-range view of his life on his birthday and decided last year that he had spent more than half his life as a judge and that it was time to retire.

He will play more music, continue jogging, travel and spend more time with his family. Court sources predict he would be a great arbitrator.

And now, the governor who appointed him to the bench 34 years ago will appoint his successor. McAdams expects that could take months.

There has always been a "legitimate concern" that the seven-member court reviewing cases from Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Benito and Santa Clara counties have a Santa Cruz member, McAdams said. The appeals court reviews nearly every significant criminal conviction, and many civil judgments, and overturns a miniscule percentage, he said.

McAdams and his staff of three attorneys and one judicial assistant pore through volumes of appeals, he said. Teamwork was a nice change from making decisions alone, sometimes without time to

BIOGRAPHY

RICHARD J. MCADAMS

AGE: 67

HOME: Aptos

OCCUPATION: Justice, 6th District Court of Appeal

BACKGROUND: Practiced law for eight years; appointed to the Santa Cruz Municipal Court in 1977; first elected to the Santa Cruz Superior Court in 1998; appointed an appellate justice in 2003.

EDUCATION: Undergraduate degree, UC Berkeley; law degree, Hastings College of Law

AWARDS: Named Appellate Justice of the Year by the Santa Clara Trial Lawyers Association in 2010; invited to The Hague by the International Judicial Academy in 2007.

research the issue, McAdams said. The hardest thing was reversing a judge, he added.

"It's an awesome responsibility," McAdams said. "I've been blessed with the chance to really make law."

Santa Cruz Superior Court Judge Ariadne Symons recalled trying a "very difficult case" in front of McAdams. She was prosecuting Donald Gerald Schmidt, who was accused of sodomizing and drowning a toddler in a Lompico bathtub in 1988.

"He was a marvelous judge; he was very good in terms of being able to make difficult decisions and try difficult cases and still be human," she said. "And he was able to maintain his sense of humor, which has got to be hard."

Symons said he was very respectful of jurors' time, and started trial each day on time.

It can be lonely to be a judge, she said, adding that she admires how McAdams traveled, maintained friends and had other activities outside the legal world.

"He's had an exceptional career to have been so young and accomplished so much, but still maintained so many positive things," Symons said. "I just think the world of him."

The son of an Albany shipyard worker and termite company owner, McAdams even filled in on the California Supreme Court in 2007, on a case about the constitutional rights of Hollywood agents.

His mom, who was receiving hospice care, was able to watch him on TV, he said.

"She was very proud," he said.

McAdams said he has loved almost everything in his 34 years on the bench.

"I'm so fortunate to have had this career," he said. "The people of Santa Cruz County have been very good to me."