

Judges Can Save Lives

In most instances, members of the judiciary are recognized as respected members of the community. I am honored to have been a Texas Appellate Court Judge from 1984 until my retirement as a judge at the end of 2000. Even today, I am generally referred by the members of the community as “Judge.” I believe I am generally considered to be a fairly respected member of the community in which I live. Prior to 1980, I was not always so respected.

For example, I remember a day in early 1979 when I was on elevator in Victoria, Texas, where I lived and practiced law. A gentleman and his lawyer, who was an acquaintance of mine, were approaching the elevator, the lawyer stopped his client and said, “don’t get on that elevator, there is that crazy man,” referring to me. Though I was an active, successful lawyer, for twenty years, who had been a respected member of the community, I was in the early stages of the downward spiral of alcoholism that could only end in the gutter or the grave. I had progressed to where I was not able to function properly. My will power and intelligence could not halt the devastating effects of alcoholism.

Then, on December 13, 1979, my conduct became so egregious that Judge Clarence N. Stevenson, Judge of the 24th Judicial Court, a friend and colleague, declared a mistrial during a jury trial in which I was participating and ordered me hospitalized. I thought that life as I had known it was over. However, from the hospital, I went to a drug and alcohol treatment center and I was introduced to a way of life without alcohol or mind altering drugs or chemicals that had enabled me to handle the pressures of our profession, and life in general. This way of life also has allowed me to have a good time and be comfortable in my skin while doing so. With the help of family, colleagues and friends both

in and out of the profession, I became a better lawyer, husband, father and citizen.

In early 1984, at the urging of colleagues, I became a candidate to replace a retiring justice on the Texas Thirteenth Court of Appeals. Because of my candor in acknowledging my alcoholism, as well as the facts of my recovery, my former addiction has not been a problem, either in my original appointment or my subsequent election and re-election as a judge.

During my judicial service, as well as since, I have been active in the legal and judicial community and in an alcohol recovery program.

Since the creation of the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP) in 1989, I have been active in that program. This program, with the aid of volunteer lawyers and judges throughout the state, offers assistance to lawyers and judges and law students with problems arising from alcohol, drug and substance abuse as well as depression and other mental illness.

Contact with TLAP is completely confidential and its services are strictly for the purpose of assisting those seeking information or assistance. It is completely separate and apart from the disciplinary process.

A direct word to Texas judges is also in order. Attorneys aren't the only ones affected by the stresses of the profession. The lifestyle of the judiciary seems to make judges with tendencies toward substance abuse, dependency and depression particularly vulnerable. It seems easy to confuse respect and honor for the office with feelings of personal infallibility. The protection and isolation afforded by our colleagues and staff makes it easier to hide our addictions or depression from ourselves and others. Driven by fear of discovery and self-loathing, we often avoid facing our humanity until disaster strikes.

This can be avoided if we have the courage to seek the help that is always available. It also takes courage for a judge to confront a colleague concerning his personal life; however, if the colleague is suffering, as I was, the rewards and satisfaction to both parties can be overwhelming. A judge's action saved me from my addiction. And for that, I am eternally grateful. A judge taking action to help a lawyer or another judge, or seeking self help, is a good thing. It certainly is not hurting a lawyer or judge in any way to offer help. As a judge, by taking action, you can make a real difference in someone's life!

Please remember that the confidential resources of TLAP are an invaluable tool for judges also. There is a private line accessible for judges - 1-800-219-6474.

In summation, it took a judge to intervene in my life in order to save me from the devastating effects of addiction. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

Robert J. Seerden
Chief Justice 13th Court of Appeals (retired)