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In Chambers

Geanopoulos 'puts the kids first'

By John Flynn Rooney
Law Bulletin staff writer

Before Nicholas Geanopoulos began law school in the late 1970s, he did not know any lawyers.

"Looking back, I did not have a lot of people to turn to when I started law school," said Geanopoulos, now a Cook County circuit judge serving in the Child Protection Division, where abuse and neglect matters are heard.

Prior to becoming a judge in early 2008, Geanopoulos volunteered as a lead tutor for Illinois bar examination preparation classes sponsored by Minority Legal Education Resources Inc. Geanopoulos currently serves as a volunteer mentor for the Women's Bar Association of Illinois (WBAI).

"The one thing I try to do as an attorney and a judge is to help law students," Geanopoulos said.

Erin Forbes, a second-year student at Chicago-Kent College of Law, said Geanopoulos has served as her mentor through the WBAI for about a year. Geanopoulos extended an open invitation to Forbes to visit his courtroom.

He also helped Forbes lineup an extern position with Cook County Circuit Judge Jesse G. Reyes, who sits in the Chancery Division's Mortgage Foreclosure/Mechanic's Lien Section, she said.

Forbes said she visited Geanopoulos' courtroom once.

Geanopoulos "explained everything really well," Forbes said. "He put things in terms I understood as a first-year law student."

Born in Chicago and raised on the South Side, Geanopoulos is the oldest of Gus and Shirley Geanopoulos' three children.

Both his parents are now retired. Gus Geanopoulos worked in the restaurant and produce businesses, while his wife was a homemaker who worked part-time.

Geanopoulos credits his parents with instilling a strong work ethic and encouraging him to pursue higher education.

Geanopoulos attended the University of Illinois at Chicago and graduated from there with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice in 1979. He was the first member of his extended family to graduate from college and obtain an advanced degree, Geanopoulos said.

He possessed a longstanding interest in the



Ben Speckmann

Nicholas Geanopoulos

Circuit Judge
Cook County Circuit Court

Appointed: 2008.

Career highlights: Sole practitioner, 2006-2008; associate, Vrdolyak Law Group LLC, 1992-2006; Cook County assistant state's attorney, 1983-1992.

Age: 53.

Law school: The John Marshall Law School, 1982.

Interests: National and international travel and reading books about Chicago history and the local criminal justice system.

law and enrolled at The John Marshall Law School.

While in law school, Geanopoulos began handling criminal matters with a Rule 711 license for the Cook County state's attorney's office. That Illinois Supreme Court rule allows law students to argue cases under the supervision of a licensed attorney.

Among the lawyers who supervised

continued...

Geanopoulos in the prosecutor's office was Terence P. Gillespie, now a criminal defense attorney with Genson & Gillespie.

Geanopoulos "had a lot of potential then," Gillespie said. "He was hard working and had common sense, a great combination."

Geanopoulos received his law degree from The John Marshall Law School in 1982 and was admitted to the Illinois bar on May 5, 1983.

He then joined the state's attorney's office as a prosecutor. Geanopoulos initially handled appeals and then traffic cases.

After working in the office for slightly more than a year, Geanopoulos began prosecuting narcotics cases in the Criminal Division at 26th Street and California Avenue. He also later served as a lead prosecutor in the office's gang crimes unit.

Geanopoulos would appear before Judge Themis N. Karnezis, who now serves on the 1st District Appellate Court.

Karnezis said Geanopoulos worked very diligently and fairly, and came to court prepared.

Geanopoulos "was always a true gentleman and a true professional when he tried cases before me," Karnezis said.

After working as a prosecutor for nine years ending in 1992, Geanopoulos joined the Vrdolyak Law Group LLC and handled civil litigation there.

"I just felt it was time to look in another direction and learn civil work,"

Geanopoulos said.

In 2006, Geanopoulos branched out on his own and concentrated on criminal defense and employment law.

Geanopoulos said he enjoyed public service and had long been interested in becoming a judge.

In February 2008, the Illinois Supreme Court appointed Geanopoulos to the Cook County Circuit Court. Last year, the justices recalled Geanopoulos through Nov. 30, 2013.

Geanopoulos said he has submitted his credentials and seeks to become a Cook County associate judge.

After hearing traffic cases for about four months, Geanopoulos moved to the Child Protection Division in June 2008. Before that, he had never been in the building that houses the division.

"I had both a civil and a criminal background, which I think is helpful in this division," Geanopoulos said. "I think it's the most rewarding thing I've ever done with my law license."

Maryam Ahmad served as the lead Cook County prosecutor in Geanopoulos' courtroom when he started his stint in the Child Protection Division. Ahmad currently works as the sexual harassment officer for the Chicago Department of Human Resources but plans to return to the state's attorney's office next week, she said.

"What impressed me the most about

him was his willingness to learn child protection law," Ahmad said. "He picked up on the law really quickly."

Dean N. Bastounes, a Chicago lawyer who primarily represents parents before Geanopoulos, said the judge is "a very intelligent guy who is down to earth, which I think is a good combination.

"He puts the kids first as he should."

The most challenging part of his job involves making decisions about the best interests of a child, Geanopoulos said.

"It's difficult to tell someone, 'we're terminating your parental rights,'" Geanopoulos said.

Geanopoulos is married to Sandra A. Navarro, a Cook County assistant state's attorney. He enjoys traveling and reading books about Chicago history and the local criminal justice system.

But Geanopoulos also thoroughly enjoys his job. He recently reunited three children, who were placed in foster care, with their mother.

"One of the most gratifying things is when you get parents who complete drug or mental health services and essentially get their life back on track so they can have their children returned home," Geanopoulos said.

"I do have a number cases where children are wards of the court who attend and finish college. That's very rewarding to me."