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In Chambers

Judge 'Ponce' plans updates for County Division

By Pat Milhizer
Law Bulletin staff writer

This is another installment of an occasional series in which the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin presents Q&As with Cook County Circuit Court presiding judges.

At 12 years old, Edmund Ponce de Leon decided he wanted to don the robe and become a judge.

The decision came when he stood in an unwanted spot — as a defendant in a juvenile case, accused of breaking a window.

"I can't say that I didn't break a window playing baseball in the back alleys of Chicago," Ponce de Leon said.

But in this case, he said he didn't do it.

The building owner who accused him attended court with an alderman and a committeeman.

"That's how political it was back then," Ponce de Leon said.

A Cook County assistant public defender represented Ponce de Leon, and she "pursued a rigorous defense," he said.

"But the most impressive was the judge. As he looked over the well of the court, looking at these powerful men, he turned and looked at me and he said, 'You look like a good kid. I don't believe you did it.' ... I knew then that I wanted to be just like him," he said.

Ponce de Leon, 58, worked as a Chicago police officer in Humboldt Park and parts of Logan Square after he graduated from Northeastern Illinois University. He earned a law degree at The John Marshall Law School in 1984 and worked for 12 years at small firms and as a sole practitioner.

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Paul McGrath

Elected as a circuit judge on the Cook County bench in 1996, Edmund Ponce de Leon started in the Domestic Relations Division. He moved to the Law Division in 2001 and became the presiding judge of the 4th Municipal District in Maywood in 2002. Last year, he became the presiding judge of the County Division.

Last year, he became the presiding judge of the County Division, the oldest division of the circuit court.

The division handles cases in which residents and business owners protest their property assessments to try to reduce their property taxes. Judges in the division also manage dockets that include adoptions, tax deed sales, election disputes, property forfeitures, name changes and mental health commitments.

Known as "Ponce" to his friends and colleagues, the judge said his division qualifies as "the dumping ground for any claim that has no home or specified forum. This is the established circuit court rule."

"So when in doubt," he said, "take it to the County Division."

Law Bulletin: Talk about what you do.

Ponce de Leon: As a presiding judge, I basically wear two hats. One is administrator and one is a judge. When I first became the presiding judge appointed to the 4th Municipal District (in 2002), I asked, "Where's the presiding judge manual?" I was told there was none. It's on-the-job training. It's like being a CEO of a corporation. You have to make sure the division or district is operating efficiently. Depending on the presiding judge, sometimes you're the unofficial mentor of your judges. They come to you for advice. I feel like a psychologist sometimes.

Law Bulletin: You've been the presiding judge of the County Division since late last year. How's it going?

Ponce de Leon: It's going great. I didn't know what to expect and I didn't know that I would like it here as much as

I do until I got here. It's challenging and interesting. It has variety. ... My first case when I got here, I was handed the Rahm Emanuel election case — which was a heater. (The case was assigned to another judge via the court's random system). But those are the kind of cases that could come in here.

Law Bulletin: What have you accomplished as presiding judge of the division?

Ponce de Leon: I believe in the old adage — if it isn't broke, you don't fix it. It's a well-run machine from other presiding judges. But like any other machine, it needs to be, well, oiled and tweaked at times and you have to change a part once in a while. ... I am revisiting all remaining County Division administrative orders to eliminate out-dated and inappropriate provisions. For example, I recently vacated prior administrative directives with regards to "foreign-born" child adoptions. I have learned that administrative orders should be implemented merely to assist in efficiently running the division and case management — and not as a legislative tool to create additional requirements or substantive law, which are inappropriate. Currently, I'm devising detailed guidelines for a help desk or legal assistance program for pro se defendants in delinquent property tax cases who are at risk of losing their homes. ... Furthermore, I am now in the process of implementing video conferencing procedures in mental health cases. The legislature this year enacted a law allowing video conferencing in all mental health hearings.

The costs involved in the transport of patients, court-reporters, clerks, interpreters and the sheriff's office would

be sharply curtailed. It would also assist those patients who are unable to travel, disabled, incapacitated or pose harm to themselves or others. ... I have implemented administrative directives requiring all County Division cases to be electronically randomized by the clerk in assigning judges, especially in election cases. Furthermore, as I did in the 4th Municipal District, I have reallocated certain calls, hearings and trials to afternoon calls for efficient use of courtrooms and to alleviate the morning loads by evenly dividing cases.

Law Bulletin: What's the best part of your job?

Ponce de Leon: Dealing with the judges and the lawyers off the bench because I really enjoy working with people and interacting; developing systems that make the judicial process much more efficient.

Law Bulletin: What advice do you have for somebody who is thinking about becoming a presiding judge some day?

Ponce de Leon: Ask for a raise (laughs). You have to have a lot of patience, the ability to communicate with your judges, the ability to implement certain rules that have to be followed. One of the things I always demand is that judges not transfer cases between each other. It has to go through the presiding judge. You have to have people skills; you're not a dictator. At the same time, the division is not run by committee. You have to lay down rules but in such a way that the judiciary will follow them. And you have to have lots of available hours.

Law Bulletin: What are things that attorneys should avoid doing when practicing in this division?

Ponce de Leon: Lawyers should not

allow cases to become stagnant, especially since most County Division matters are time-sensitive. Tagging a status date onto a case is effective and most judges in the County Division will insist on a subsequent date. Attorneys should not appear unprepared since these cases, especially property tax matters, are expedited.

Law Bulletin: What are things that attorneys should be sure to do when practicing in this division?

Ponce de Leon: We get a lot of general practitioners that come into this division and it's very specialized in complex areas of law, especially adoptions. The bars that practice before this division are people that have been doing this for quite some time. We do get some lawyers that aren't experienced to know what the procedure would be, so I would advise lawyers to either consult others who do practice regularly within the division before pleading a case here.

Law Bulletin: What type of music do you listen to?

Ponce de Leon: Anything that sounds good to the ears. I enjoy jazz very much. I like classical music and I like some of the stuff we heard in the '60s, '70s from rock music. I enjoy the Beatles, the Rolling Stones.

Law Bulletin: What would be your ideal vacation?

Ponce de Leon: To live in Galena, Ill. for the rest of my life. I have a small cabin there. I look forward to going out there on my pontoon and throwing out a line.

Law Bulletin: Where's the best place to grab lunch in the Loop and dinner in the rest of the city?

Ponce de Leon: The Elephant & Castle has great food, including the best cheeseburger in town.