

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 118

“I promise to work hard, to be fair and ... to remember the words and the ideals of the oath that I just took.”

Johnston joins bench

Admirers praise new federal magistrate judge's empathy for others, legal smarts

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New U.S. Magistrate Judge Iain D. Johnston brings a quality to his work that sets him apart from many members of the legal profession, two former colleagues said.

“In addition to his zeal and passion for the law, there's the fact that Iain never really forgets the human aspect of our business,” Andrew R. Greene of Johnston, Greene LLP said of his former law partner.

Likewise, Illinois Assistant Attorney General Gary M. Griffin said Johnston combines a knowledge of the law with a feel for people.

“He respects the legal process and procedures tremendously, but he also knows that every case involves real people with real consequences,” Griffin said.

Griffin and Greene spoke Friday to the group gathered at the Dirksen Federal Courthouse to see Johnston formally installed on the federal bench for an eight-year term.

Johnston is based in the Stanley J. Roszkowski U.S. Courthouse in Rockford.

He succeeded U.S. Magistrate Judge P. Michael Mahoney, who retired at the end of last year but remains on the bench as a recalled judge. Chief U.S. District Judge James F. Holderman presided over the investiture.

Johnston's father, Robert Gilbert Johnston, made the motion for his son to be installed on the bench.

“Iain is knowledgeable, gracious and temperate,” said “Gil” Johnston, a professor and

former dean of The John Marshall Law School.

U.S. District Judge Philip G. Reinhard administered the oath. “You have distinguished yourself as a lawyer, both in this court and in state court,” Reinhard told Johnston before performing that task.

Reinhard joked that Johnston's appointment breaks a long-standing tradition.

Unlike the other jurists serving on the federal bench in Rockford — Reinhard, Mahoney and U.S. District Judge Frederick J. Kapala — Johnston did not graduate from the University of Illinois College of Law, Reinhard said.

That “problem,” he said, could be remedied by awarding Johnston an honorary degree or by asking him to root for the school's teams.

In comments later in the ceremony, Johnston — a Rockford College and John Marshall graduate — declined to swear allegiance to the Fighting Illini.

But he did say he would follow the school's teams.

And he made other promises.

“I promise to work hard, to be fair and I promise to remember the words and the ideals of the oath that I just took,” Johnston said.

While Johnston took the oath, his wife, Elizabeth, held a Bible carried during World War I by Johnston's great-uncle, David Johnston, who served in the British army.

The Johnstons' daughter, Lily, 13, helped her father put on his robe after he took the oath.

Those attending the ceremony included Johnston's stepmother,



New U.S. Magistrate Judge Iain D. Johnston gets help putting on his robe from his 13-year-old daughter, Lily, after a formal installation ceremony Friday at the Dirksen Federal Courthouse. Johnston, who succeeds P. Michael Mahoney, will be based in Rockford. Ben Speckmann

Jane, and his brother, Ben. Johnston's mother, Janice, is deceased.

Other family members watched a live stream of the investiture at the federal courthouse in Honolulu. Following the ceremony, relatives who traveled to Chicago from Hawaii for the ceremony presented Johnston with a lei. Johnston, 48, earned his undergraduate degree in 1987 and law degree in 1990, then served as a judicial law clerk to Reinhard.

Reinhard was a justice on the Illinois Appellate Court when Johnston joined his staff and became a federal district judge while Johnston still worked for him.

Johnston next joined the Illinois attorney general's office, where he became supervisor of the Civil Prosecutions Unit.

Johnston then went into private practice, working first at the now-defunct Altheimer & Gray and then at Holland &

Knight LLP.

In 2008, Johnston helped found Johnston, Greene LLC. His practice focused on commercial matters, employment litigation and state and local government law.

Johnston also represented the Illinois Division of Insurance and the Illinois State Police as a special assistant attorney general and served as an administrative law judge for the insurance division, the state police and the Illinois Drycleaner Environmental Response Trust Fund Council.

Johnston was selected to serve on the bench by the judges on the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois who have lifetime tenure under Article 3 of the U.S. Constitution.

The judges were assisted in their task by a merit panel headed by Chief 15th Judicial Circuit Judge Val Gunnarsson, who sits in state court in northwestern Illinois.