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Arkansas roots, Windy City climb

Evans reflects on the path that led him to become Cook County's first black chief judge

By Dustin J. Seibert

At a very young age, Tim Evans determined that he wanted to be a doctor. Thanks to a mother who instilled in him the value of hard work and education, he would likely have been successful practicing medicine.

But thanks to inspiration from prominent civil rights movement attorneys and public figures such as Thurgood Marshall and C.B. King, Evans dropped dreams of a medical career for one that ultimately resulted in him making some history of his own — as the first black chief judge of the Cook County Circuit Court.

That Evans climbed the ranks as a minority

to head one of the world's largest court systems is enough to stake a claim in the local history books. And after a nearly half-century career dedicated to public service and social justice and pushing for progress in the circuit court, he has a story to tell.

At 70 years of age, Evans could retire today and rest on the laurels of the change he's prompted in the county judiciary. But he shows no sign of slowing down.

Away from prejudice

Evans' story, though, begins far from Chicago, below the Mason-Dixon line in the post-

World War II era.

Born in 1943 in Hot Springs, Ark., Evans' fate as a child ran against the prejudiced hand of Orval Faubus, the Arkansas governor notorious for his refusal to cooperate in the desegregation of the Little Rock school system.

When Faubus defied President Dwight Eisenhower's order to desegregate schools, the governor shut down the entire Little Rock school district for a year, sending some of its students to Hot Springs, almost 50 miles away. Faubus then threatened to come after schools in Hot Springs.

The prospect of her children missing out on their education was enough of an impetus for

Evans' mother, Tiny, to leave the state.

"She was completely dedicated to our education and wouldn't hear anything of us that was not education first," Evans said of his mother, who obtained her master's degree in education at the University of Arkansas.

After moving to Chicago, Evans ultimately wound up at Hirsch High School. He admits to being under the impression that "everything was fine here in the north and only in the south were African-Americans discriminated against."

"People told me immediately that I would not be welcomed by some people here, just as I wasn't welcomed by people in Arkansas," he said.

Administrators at Hirsch put Evans through the motions — insisting first that he needed his birth certificate to attend and later sending him home because he had a mustache, which was apparently against the rules.

"I looked around and everyone going home with facial hair was African-American," he laughed. "So I shaved it off and went on back."

Evans' plan since he was a young boy was to attend medical school and become a doctor. But when he graduated from Hirsch in 1961, the ramping up of the civil rights movement inspired him to go in another direction.

"Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP movers and shakers were lawyers, not doctors," he said.

He went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign enrolled as a premed student, but he was advised that he could complete those classes and still enroll in law school. So he obtained a bachelor's degree in zoology and headed to The John Marshall Law School in 1965.

He went there because of the school's history of inclusion.

"They invited African-American students and women students at a time when it was difficult for both to get a law degree," he said. "Many of the instructors at John Marshall were well aware of the civil rights movement and the role that law school could play in breaking down discrimination throughout the country."

Evans said he and his instructors understood that people like Thurgood Marshall — who could not attend the University of Maryland School of Law because of its segregation policies and later, as a lawyer, helped sue the school for discrimination — were leading the charge. Marshall would ultimately become the first black U.S. Supreme Court justice.

"We stand on the shoulders of people like Thurgood Marshall," he said.

Though Evans' family didn't have the money to pay outright tuition for law school, his grades were good enough to qualify for scholarships. To help pay for the rest, he took classes during the day and worked as a law clerk at night. Because his firm, Peterson Harris & Crenshaw, focused largely on domestic relations, Evans was motivated to lean in the direction of public service in his civil practice to come.

"Law school had a great influence on my civil practice," he said.

After he graduated in 1969, a professor recommended that Evans consider work in the public sector: the Cook County state's attorney office, U.S. attorney's office or the Chicago corporation counsel's office. He opted to work for the city.

Evans described his first days in the Torts Division of the city Law Department as an exciting time to begin his career, but he quickly saw an exorbitant number of cases dropped on his desk.

"It was baptism by fire," he said.

One of Evans' big influences in the office was the late Earl L. Neal, who worked in the Housing Division. Neal's father, Earl J., was a circuit court judge and his son, Langdon Neal, is now chairman of the Chicago Board of Elections.

"(Earl L.) was another person that led me to believe it was possible to be a great lawyer," he said.

From law to politics

Evans' career in the corporation counsel's office was successful by any measure — he never lost a case in two years. He was promoted to deputy commissioner of the Department of Investigations, where he worked for 18 months before becoming chief hearing officer for the Illinois secretary of state.

It was while in that position that Evans first made a name for himself in Chicago politics. The passing of 4th Ward Ald. Claude Holman while in office left an opening and prompted a special election. Evans won, becoming an alderman in 1973 — a position he held until 1991.

One of Evans' primary aldermanic goals was to bridge the socioeconomic divide between Grand Boulevard/Oakland and the more affluent Hyde Park/Kenwood areas of the ward.

"People knew that if you could spread (wealth) across portions of Chicago that didn't

have integration or opportunities yet, there was great potential," he said.

Evans played a role in opening several schools in the ward during the early part of his aldermanic career, including Jackie Robinson Elementary School on 43rd Street and Lake Park Avenue.

"I enjoyed working with the residents of that community," he said. "It was a marvelous area to represent."

He cited one of his biggest aldermanic accomplishments as helping save Provident Hospital of Cook County from closing. Provident is the country's first black-owned and operated hospital, established by Daniel Hale Williams, who used it to conduct the country's first open-heart surgery 120 years ago.

Evans said he helped stave off detractors who declared the hospital superfluous and believed that Cook County Hospital — now John Stroger Hospital — was sufficient to handle the residents in the 4th Ward.

"Cook County (Hospital) is on the West Side, miles and miles away," he said. "How could people experiencing trauma get all the way from the South Side to the West Side without losing their lives?"

In terms of affordable health care, Provident was the only feasible option for those who didn't have access to health care at nearby University of Chicago Hospital, Evans said.

"People without financial means could not go to that hospital," he said. "They could go there and be stabilized, but then they'd be sent away. I saw saving Provident as a way to stabilize that community and I let people know it was worth it."

Beside a historic mayor

Evans played a significant role in the administration of Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor: He headed Washington's political office and served as his floor leader in the City Council. Evans also served as chairman of the council's first-ever Budget Committee.

When Washington died while in office in 1987, Evans' name surfaced to replace him — an idea that flattered Evans, but only to a degree.

"I had hoped that he would have lived as long as he said he would," Evans said. "He announced to us that he would be mayor for 20 years and I was one of those who believed him. So I wasn't seeking to replace him ... I'd hoped to be working right along with him as I had been."

Evans > feature

The city council, though, voted instead to appoint Ald. Eugene Sawyer to fill out Washington's term. Evans ran for mayor as an independent candidate in the 1989 special election, but lost to Richard M. Daley — who had defeated Sawyer in the Democratic primary.

More than 428,000 voted for Evans then — a total he said is the largest amount of votes ever cast for anyone challenging a Daley for the mayoral seat.

"The people who stood with me in that challenge with someone as famous as a Daley showed a lot of courage," he said.

Though he lost, Evans was in Daley's corner during his stint as mayor, as he said he appreciated their similar political ideas and that Daley retained some of Washington's administration, including now-former presidential adviser David Axelrod.

"Having watched his father run the city, having seen him serve in public office and carry on some of the progressive agenda that Harold Washington had been a part of ... certainly I could see the seeds of Harold Washington's success continuing on," Evans said.

As chief judge, Evans swore in Daley as mayor several times, as well as current Mayor Rahm Emanuel following his 2011 election. As for taking another shot at the big seat, he's clear that he's quite content where he is.

"I'm perfectly happy as chief judge," he said. "I know there are many capable people out there who wish to serve as mayor. I certainly had my opportunity and I want to see others committed to the progressive agenda have the opportunity."

"I have no idea what would have happened if I followed another route, but I have had great opportunities in the route I did follow."

The issue of diversity

Elected to a spot on the Cook County bench in 1992, Evans took over the chief judgeship in 2001, hoping to correct many of the issues he encountered in his nine years handling cases. Many of those issues involved what he saw when walking through the holding cells at 26th Street and California Avenue.

"There's no question that there's a disproportionate number of minorities locked up," he said. "It's not that there's a proclivity toward illegal conduct from any particular group. It's a reflection of opportunities, and I think the day will come when we find that it's

better to stop the cycle of violence and criminality and help people."

Among his first official actions as chief judge was to permit people arrested overnight to have a bond hearing in front of the judge the day after; hearings were previously conducted more impersonally via closed circuit television.

He said he also asked Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle — who unseated Evans as alderman in 1991 — to utilize county funds to create a more humane setting for those arrested that "reflected their presumed innocence," including improving holding cells and making it easier for the accused to speak with their attorneys.

"I start with the premise that the conditions that encourage people to do something to get them in trouble have to change in order for us to expect changes down the line," he said.

He admits it's "still not a perfect system," but that it's steadily improving.

"I (work to) make it possible for people to be treated humanely and be given the presumption of innocence our Constitution says they are entitled to," he said.

For Evans, racial tolerance is but one piece of the full puzzle of equality: He believes the plight of women, senior citizens and other disenfranchised groups also deserve attention. He first aimed to enact substantive change when he became the presiding judge of the Domestic Relations Division in 1995.

Having witnessed the worst parts of divorce and child custody battles as a judge in the division, he sought to protect the victims of domestic violence who were in danger from their estranged spouses as they went through the divorce process. Ten years later, as chief judge, he established the Domestic Violence Court-house at 555 W. Harrison St.

The courthouse has, among other things, victim-only elevators, secured waiting rooms for victims and screening areas that protect victims from being confronted by their alleged aggressors.

"It became crystal clear that there needed to be a different way to resolve some of those differences than the way they had it, so people could be treated fairly and we could (help) break the cycle of violence," he said.

At the end of last year, Evans signed an order establishing the Elder Law & Miscellaneous Remedies Division, which will centralize sup-

port services and resources for elderly citizens who are being abused by or are having their rights overlooked by caretakers and others.

Chicago Bar Association Executive Director Terry Murphy said Evans' creation of that division is indicative of his overall dedication to promoting positive change.

"I've always been impressed with his ability to get things done," Murphy said. "The population all across the world is getting older and that population will need more legal services. It's great that Cook County will be on the leading edge of establishing this division."

Appointments with class

As chief judge, Evans is responsible for personally appointing each Cook County judge to the courthouse of his choice. On average, there are about 420 judges in 13 courthouses handling civil and criminal cases throughout the county.

Each new judge needs to attend a weeklong training course to help them transition from practicing law to going to the bench and all members of the Illinois judiciary are mandated to attend a biennial education conference "to stay on the cutting edge of judicial excellence," Evans said.

Judges start off in the 1st Municipal District, generally hearing traffic cases, before moving up the ranks.

"We ask them to treat traffic cases as if they're the most important cases they'll ever have," Evans said. "That way, they will have a grounding and appreciation for their craft. Even if they are not in the most sought-after division, all cases that come through the county are important."

When it's time for judges to move on from 1st Municipal, the buck stops with Evans regarding their next appointment; he ultimately speaks with each one before determining where they will be placed next.

In addition to factoring in their previous experience as well as their individual desires, Evans also works to maintain a gender and ethnic balance in the courthouses. He aims to appoint roughly an equal number of male and female judges.

"I felt that it was best to have leadership be inclusive of men and women; I've tried my best to make sure that neither (gender) was overlooked," he said.

The gender balance was not enough for Evans — he has also made it a point to con-

sider diversity for leadership roles in the various divisions. This includes naming the first woman, Dorothy Kirie Kinnaird, to head the Chancery Division in 2002. He also appointed Edmund Ponce DeLeon, Cook County's first Latino to be a presiding judge, to head the County Division, and the first openly gay presiding judge, Sebastian T. Patti, to the Domestic Violence Division.

But Evans said he makes sure that white judges are not overlooked and that "everyone has a role to play."

"It's not so much that individuals in court need to be in a position where their cases are heard by somebody who has the same racial or ethnic background, but the point is to be inclusive of all communities so that people who come to the circuit court of Cook County know that their community has not been ignored," he said.

"When they see that every community is represented on the bench, then they can be encouraged that it's more likely they'll be treated fairly."

Patti said Evans "has one of the greatest senses of fairness and justice of any person I've ever met. As a function of that commitment to justice and fair play, he believes strongly that the judiciary should be reflective of society, of our community, of the citizenry in Chicago and Cook County as a whole."

Patti added that Evans "is not one to capitalize on issues for his own self-aggrandizement. He is one to capitalize on issues for the betterment of the circuit court of Cook County and that's a huge distinction. He's not in this

for himself. He is in this for the circuit court of Cook County and the constituent judges of the circuit court of Cook County. I'm looking in the mirror and saying this with a completely straight face."

Moshe Jacobius has been a circuit judge for about the same time as Evans, who appointed Jacobius to his current position as head of the Chancery Division. Jacobius has served on a committee Evans appoints to select associate judge candidates.

"Under his leadership, we really work hard to find the balance of diversity and pluralism with the candidates," Jacobius said. "We really focus on having judges from all various nationalities and backgrounds."

Jacobius, who also counts Evans as a friend, said that his push for professional diversity in the county mirrors his personal proclivities.

"He gets along with people of all backgrounds," he said. "He wants to learn about people, different religions, different nationalities — he takes a great interest in it. He just has that ability to mesh with everybody."

In the event that Evans encounters a judge who is, for whatever reason, not passing muster, he said he takes problem-solving measures instead of punitive ones. For example, if a judge is in need of a bit of training, he will assign a mentor judge to work with them on the bench.

"We don't solve a problem by moving folks district to district," Evans said. "We embrace the thought of getting judges help instead of transferring the problem to try to solve it. We recognize that they are human beings with frailties too."

The highest honor

Evans has received many different awards for his work in the judiciary. Perhaps the most prestigious — and personally meaningful — was the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice John G. Roberts Jr. presented Evans with the award at the U.S. Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C., in 2009. He was the first and, to date, only Illinois judge to receive the award.

"It recognized many of the innovative approaches that we have embraced here at Cook County and it was just a wonderful experience to receive it," Evans said.

The experience was especially memorable because Evans was accompanied by his twin daughters, Catherine and Cynthia Evans, and his father, George Evans. Roberts requested a picture with George, who was 92 at the time. He passed away in 2011.

"He was able to be with me on one of the most important days as a member of the judiciary," he said. "In addition to the award itself, I was just happy he was able to be there."

Decades after he first came to Chicago, Evans still plans to keep serving here.

"I am interested in seeing the progressive agenda continue — open government and fairness to all segments of society," Evans said. "A way for people to see in their government a partner instead of someone just imposing their will on citizens." ■

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