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## Leaving the bench, not the courtroom

**'It's time to turn the page,' Sterba says of his law firm move**

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When David P. Sterba retired from the Illinois Appellate Court earlier this month, he wasn't quite ready to leave the courtroom.

The 55-year-old wanted to return to his roots as a trial lawyer.

"I went on the bench relatively young — I was 39 years old," said Sterba, who was assigned to the 1st District Appellate Court in 2011 after serving as a Cook County circuit judge for 15 years.

"I always knew in the back of my mind that ultimately I would return to the practice of law and litigating cases."

Sterba retired July 1 and started work the next day as a partner at Walsh, Fewkes, Sterba Law Offices — formerly Walsh, Fewkes & Kantas P.C. He intends to handle criminal defense and personal-injury cases for plaintiffs, he said.

The firm consists of Sterba, Matthew P. Walsh and David A. Fewkes Jr. It does not currently

have any associates.

"I'm a trial lawyer by nature," Sterba said. "I have those skills necessary to be effective and persuasive. ... That's one of the things I always felt I did best, and I'm anxious to return to it."

After earning a law degree from The John Marshall Law School, Sterba began his legal career as a Cook County assistant state's attorney in 1984. In 1990, he began working as a sole practitioner, handling criminal defense and personal-injury cases.

Six years later, he was elected as a Cook County circuit judge. He served in the trial court until his assignment to the appellate court.

Justice Terrence J. Lavin, who served on the same appeals division as Sterba for about one year, said Sterba brought a nuanced perspective as a former trial lawyer and trial judge.

"In a somewhat quiet branch of the legal profession here in the appellate court, Dave has been an exceptional colleague — an engaging, animated and intellectually stimulating sparring partner on issues large and small," Lavin said in an e-mail.

Sterba decided to retire, in part, for financial reasons, he said. He has three children, all of whom have tuition bills.

Sterba said he remains keenly



David P. Sterba

aware of the "blessings" of his career, especially as a judge. He encountered difficulty crafting his May 30 letter to the Illinois Supreme Court announcing his plan to retire, he said.

"That was a tough letter to write," Sterba said. "To sit down in front of the computer and write a letter that effectively put an end to my judicial career. ... It caused me to become very reflective."

Sterba said there are some parts of the appellate court that he will not miss — such as the isolation that the job requires.

"This is a very monastic environment. And although it's necessary to do this job ... I am

by nature a people person. I like being around people," Sterba said. "I was someone who, prior to this, infrequently went to lunch. Now I go to lunch every day, just to have contact with humanity."

Sterba has known Walsh and Fewkes for more than 30 years. Walsh asked Sterba if he would consider joining the firm earlier this year.

"Most judges don't want to go back to working in a courtroom anymore," Walsh said. "Trial practice is chaotic, and Dave's got the high energy and wants to get back in it again. I can learn a great deal from him because he's such a good researcher and appellate lawyer. ... It's a real plus for us; we're happy to have him."

Sterba also works as an adjunct professor at John Marshall, where he teaches trial advocacy.

When asked which role he liked best — lawyer or judge — Sterba said it's impossible to choose.

"That's hard to say — that's like asking me if I like vanilla ice cream or chocolate ice cream better," Sterba said. "I like them both. Everything I've done, I've thoroughly enjoyed and tried to give it my all and do my best at it, and that's the gospel truth. I've enjoyed it all, and now it's time to turn the page."