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523 trials and counting

After 25 years on the bench, Sacks has seen a lot — and still plans to see a lot more

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
Law Bulletin staff writer

It's a Wednesday afternoon in Courtroom 602 at the Leighton Criminal Court Building, and Cook County Associate Judge Stanley Sacks can't believe what he's seeing.

Actually, he can. And that's the problem.

Two men stand in front of him. Douglas Chambliss has been accused of shooting Andrew Hill. Chambliss was arrested, and Hill was subpoenaed to testify.

Hill wouldn't come to court. So he was arrested.

"A sad commentary," Sacks says to anyone listening, which is Chambliss, Hill, their respective attorneys, the court reporter and the crowd in the courtroom — some there to support Chambliss, some to support Hill, some waiting for a murder trial set to begin in 20 minutes.

"A man who was shot and ... doesn't want to testify," Sacks says.

He dismisses the charges against Chambliss and tells both men they are free to go.

At that, Hill begins to smile. As a sheriff's deputy leads him around Sacks' bench to lockup, Hill turns over his right shoulder and sees friends in the back of the courtroom. He points to them and waves in celebration.

"Mr. Hill!" Sacks bellows. And then, to the sheriff: "Bring him back."

A murmur rushes through the courtroom. Hill's supporters tense up — is their friend about to get jail time for fishing?

Sacks just wants to talk to him.

"Be cool, my man," he says to Hill, who is now standing at

attention. "You're not in the street high-fiving your homeboys. You're in court. Act like it."

Sacks releases Hill, who this time walks slowly and quietly to lockup.

Back in his chambers that afternoon, Sacks is disappointed but not surprised.

"(It) is not uncommon, unfortunately, in a lot of these cases," he said. "The victims don't come to court, or they come to court and change their version of what happened."

If anyone knows about trends, it's Sacks. The 72-year-old has been a Cook County associate judge since Dec. 8, 1988. Twenty-five years and 523 jury trials later, he is still in Courtroom 602, still in love with his job.

But sometimes ...

"Yeah, it bothers me," Sacks said, referring to cases that are, as he describes it, more likely to be resolved on the streets than in court.

"Even serious cases like this, where a guy got shot and had to be arrested to come to court. ... You're taking up the court's time, taking up the policeman's time, taking up the state's attorney's time, the lawyer's time. And a lot of times, the victims don't care after a while."

Sacks cares.

The courthouse, he says, is his second home. His chambers is filled with his personal history — a framed photo of his parents that occupies most of the wall behind his desk; mounted fish he's caught on his beloved fishing trips; a picture with Fred G. Suria Jr. (the judge who previously occupied 602); photos of Sacks imitating Groucho Marx and a photo from White Sox fantasy camp in



Stanley Sacks

Cook County Associate Judge

- **Appointed:** Dec. 8, 1988
- **Career:** United Charities of Chicago, 1967-1969; public defender's office, 1969-1980; private practice, 1980-1984; corporation counsel's office, 1984-1988
- **Age:** 72
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 1967
- **Interests:** Family and friends; fishing, tennis and baseball

January, where Sacks hit .207 and helped his team win a championship.

Right now, though, as he sits in his chambers and talks about Hill and Chambliss, his mind is a long way from fishing in Florida or baseball in Arizona.

"The system doesn't work right," he said. "It should work where you have your trial, they say what happened and the judge and the jury make the decision on what happened. ...

"I have no idea about this one, but in some cases, let's say a guy is found not guilty. Sometimes they're better off if they are found guilty. Because while the jury or judge might say, 'There is not enough evidence to find you guilty by a reasonable doubt,' the streets don't say that. ... I've had four or five cases where the guy was found not guilty and, within three or four months, he was murdered.

"So was he better off being

found not guilty and getting out and being killed? Or was he better off being found guilty?"

As for Hill's courtroom bravado?

"I like when a person's in court and they act like they're in court," he said. "He'll be out of custody later on today and can go home later on today. He can take his happiness home with him and rejoice there."

Sacks takes a sip of his coffee.

"When you're laughing or carrying on and high-fiving your friends in the audience, you're not acting like you're in court," he says. "You're acting like you're in the streets somewhere. I think that's disrespectful. I don't care, personally. I don't take anything personally out there. ... But they have to respect the position."

'A poor choice of words.'

In October 2004, Sacks had a day where he did not act like he was in court.

Standing in front of him was Alonzo Caudillo, a Chicago police officer who, while off-duty, struck a 19-year-old woman with his Jeep.

Caudillo was drunk. The woman, soon after, was dead.

Caudillo, then 35, was charged with reckless homicide. In a bench trial, Sacks found Caudillo guilty, a decision the 1st District Appellate Court confirmed.

While explaining his finding, Sacks used profanity. As a result, Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans suspended Sacks and ordered him to take anger management classes and meet for three months with a psychologist.

Sacks returned to the bench in February 2005.

"I used a poor choice of words," Sacks said, also contending the notion he swore directly at Caudillo is a misconception.

"I did not swear at anybody. But in the heat of the moment, I said what I felt at the time. Looking back, I would have probably kept it to myself."

Sacks' anger, he said, rose from the preferential treatment he believed police granted Caudillo at the scene of the incident along with the preferential treatment Caudillo attempted to gain. When police arrived, Sacks said, the first words out of Caudillo's mouth were "I'm a cop."

"Which obviously, in my viewpoint, was trying to curry favor with the cops who came to

arrest him,” Sacks said.

Rather than handcuffing him, the police spoke with Caudillo, took his statement and walked him to the police car to drive him away.

“They just walk him to the car,” Sacks said in court that day. “You know damn well if that guy was a brother from the projects, a guy on his way home from work, he’d have been handcuffed against that car in five seconds.”

That wasn’t the part that got Sacks in trouble. It was what he said next. As he recalls saying:

“If I were a police officer who came to the scene of a crime like this, and I approached the defendant who hit this young girl and left her laying in the street dying and attempted to get away, and when the cops approached him he did not say, ‘How’s the girl doing?’ His only response was ‘I’m a cop.’ ...

“If I were one of those cops, I might have said ‘What the f--- do I care? You’re under arrest.’”

“Unquestionably a very poor choice of words,” he says now.

He understands Evans’ decision.

“He’s the chief judge,” Sacks said. “I have no quarrel with what he did. I was wrong. I accepted the penalty and moved on from there.”

Since then, he said, he has been successful in controlling his temper in court.

“I’m an emotional person, but I think I’ve tried to keep my temper intact over the years,” he said. “I think I’ve done that.”

‘The greatest job’

Prominently displayed behind the bench in Courtroom 602 is a sign that says “LIFE IS GOOD.” A similar sign hangs in Sacks’ chambers.

“A very special friend of mine named Bryan Anderson — he came back from Iraq in 2005,” Sacks said. “He lost both legs and one arm. Both legs way up high and one arm.”

Anderson’s return as a triple amputee garnered media coverage. The Rolling Meadows native did interviews and was on the cover of Esquire magazine in January 2007 under the words “The Meaning of Life.”

Sacks saw Anderson on TV after

he was released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. The interviewer asked Anderson how he felt.

Anderson’s reply was simple: “Life is good.”

“I have to meet this kid,” Sacks recalls saying when he saw the program. “He’s special.”

Sacks tracked him down in 2012 and arranged a dinner between himself, his wife and Anderson.

“That’s his philosophy in life,” Sacks said, pointing to the sign. “So if I have a bad day, I say, ‘What would Bryan Anderson say?’ He’d say ‘Life is good.’ So what’s there to complain about?”

The relationship isn’t just special for Sacks and Anderson.

“As a retired Marine, I’m extremely disappointed with how the country treats its veterans,” said Cook County Circuit Judge William H. Hooks. “So any time we have someone like Judge Sacks who is willing to reach out to an American hero and volunteer to help him is very special.”

When Sacks was first trying to track Anderson down, he spoke

with Hooks about what kind of services are provided to triple amputees. Sacks wanted to learn how he could help.

He arranged for Anderson to be honored before a Chicago Bulls game. The two keep in touch regularly, and Sacks keeps a photo of Anderson on his desk.

“The job is so hard,” Hooks said of being a judge. “Your sensitivities get burned out. So when you have a guy who has been on the job as long as Sacks and he still has compassion for people, it means there’s hope for all of us.”

Sacks pointed proudly to photos of the special people in his life — his wife and daughter, his six boyhood friends, his parents and Anderson. At the age of 72, he has no plans to retire.

Baseball lets players know when they’re done. They can’t hit. They can’t field.

The same will be for Sacks.

“The time isn’t now,” he said, 10 minutes before leaving his chambers to continue his 523rd career jury trial. “But I think when I get to that point, I’ll know.”