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A judicial reference guy

After 26 years on the criminal court bench, Porter is a trusted resource for colleagues

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On the sixth floor of the Leighton Criminal Court Building sits a resource revered by the Cook County judiciary — unless, of course, the resource is standing.

"If someone has a question in this building or even outside the building, the first person they should go to is Dennis Porter," Cook County Associate Judge Stanley Sacks said.

Porter, 67, has been an associate judge since 1988. In that time, he has established himself as a judge's judge — "the dean of the building," as Sacks calls him.

He is one of the court's five supervisory judges reporting to Circuit Judge Paul P. Biebel Jr., the presiding judge of the Criminal Division; one of two judges heading a project to computerize all of the court's judicial orders; and lauded by fellow judges for his work ethic and legal knowledge.

Mostly though, he is a man who cares deeply about the court system because he likes being in court. It's the reason he pursued a judgeship.

"A judge has the advantage of being in court every day," Porter said. "You have all of the advantages and none of the disadvantages."

Those disadvantages include wondering if your witnesses will show up for court and what they will say when they do.

"I get to be in court and don't

have to worry about the other stuff," he said. "It looked like a pretty good job for me, so when I got the opportunity to run for it, I took it."

'Give 'em eight for eight'

Born in Waukegan in 1947, Porter inherited his work ethic and love of law from his parents. His father was a boilermaker, running the machine that punched holes in steel plates.

"He had huge forearms," the 6-foot-4 Porter said about his father, John.

After making boilers for the bulk of Porter's childhood, Porter's father took a job running a gas station and later worked as a janitor at Warren Township High School in Gurnee, the school Porter attended.

Porter joined his father on the janitorial staff during the summer after his junior and senior years, then took a job at Commonwealth Edison at the generating station in Waukegan when he entered college.

Porter's father drove him to the plant for the first day of work. He parked the car and looked at Porter.

"Give 'em eight for eight," John Porter told his son, referring to eight hours of work for eight hours of pay.

"I think that's a good way to describe him," Porter said. "You do what you're being paid for. You do the best you can. And that's what you do. You don't slack off on your job."

His mother, Nellie, also played a role in Porter's professional development. She was a clerk in Lake County Juvenile Court who



Dennis J. Porter

Cook County Associate Judge

- Appointed: 1988
- Career: Cook County assistant state's attorney, 1974-1983; Illinois assistant attorney general, 1983-1988; Cook County associate judge, 1988-present
- Age: 67
- Law school: The John Marshall Law School, 1974
- Interests: Time with family; reading, particularly biographies and books about the Civil War; playing golf

steered Porter to a law career almost absentmindedly.

Porter recalls filling out forms with his mother for his orientation at Carroll College (now known as Carroll University) in Waukesha, Wis. One form asked, "What career do you want to prepare for?"

"What should I put down for this?" the 18-year-old Porter asked his mother.

"Eh, just put down law," she told him.

The first time he met with his academic adviser, law courses were recommended for him based solely on Porter's orientation form.

"By the end of the four years, I did want to be a lawyer," Porter said, laughing.

After graduating in 1969 with a political science major, Porter enrolled at The John Marshall Law School. His studies were interrupted after three weeks

when he was drafted into the Army, where he administered real estate leases the U.S. government had from Vietnamese nationals.

He was in South Vietnam from Feb. 15, 1970, to April 28, 1971.

"You see a lot of bad things happening to good people," Porter said. "It gives you a better sense of what your priorities ought to be."

The lesson was simple: "Don't sweat the small stuff"

Tough cases to listen to

"Don't sweat the small stuff" is a valuable credo for a criminal judge, especially when presiding over the case of a pedophilic man accused of killing a painter and burying him in his basement.

Or a woman and her boyfriend accused of murdering a girl after beating her with a wood board with a nail sticking out of it.

Or a man who allegedly raped a woman and then tried — and failed — to kill her by cutting her throat, electrocuting her and attempting to drown her.

Porter has seen those and more in his career, during which he has presided over 270 jury trials. He recalls watching the once-electrocuted woman crying on the witness stand every time she recounted one of her rapist's several murder attempts.

"The ones hardest to listen to are when old people are involved or young children," Porter said. "It's very sad."

Porter gets through it by appreciating the intellectual exercise. He did so in 2009 with the E2 trial, in which criminal charges were brought against four men associated with a nightclub where a stampede killed 21 people in 2003.

Porter found the men not guilty because "I didn't think the law fit."

Like the case of the electrocuted woman, testimony during the E2 trial disturbed Porter. But the legal questions fascinated him, namely ones involving criminal accountability.

"You get into occupancy numbers and square footages and number of exits and all this kind of thing," Porter said. "How the law applied to that set of facts was factually interesting."

Cases like that impact him outside of the courtroom, too.

“It just makes you realize how important your family is and how you just want to take care of your loved ones,” he said.

A go-to guy

Porter’s loved ones include his wife, Ann, and their two daughters — one a doctor, the other a certified public accountant.

He also cherishes the court.

“He’s genuinely concerned about the court system and wants to make it better and makes it better by being a part of it,” Sacks said.

Porter is a resource to his fellow judges partly because of his experience and knowledge and partly because he keeps a computerized record of his entire case history. Several peers described him as a “go-to guy” to

talk about the law.

“I often get phone calls from him at night with an invitation to discuss the law,” said 1st District Appellate Justice Stuart E. Palmer. “When it comes to deciding a case on a fine point of law, he’s the perfect guy for it.”

That thirst for knowledge and use of computers is part of what made him the ideal judge — along with Circuit Judge Joseph

G. Kazmierski Jr. — for the court’s computer project.

“Judge Porter is the type of judge that lawyers like to appear in front of because he’s fair, reasoned and knowledgeable,” Biebel said.

Or, as Sacks put it: “If we know the right things to do, it helps the entire system overall. If we don’t know, we go to Dennis Porter.”