

Kahn keeps Milwaukee court in focus

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Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Charles Kahn (Staff photo by Kevin Harnack)

When Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Charles Kahn joined the bench in 1992, he brought with him not only 17 years of legal experience, but an artistic eye, as well.

Kahn, 63, has been an avid photographer since childhood and is the unofficial photographer-in-residence at the courthouse.

He has snapped portraits, which hang in Chief Judge Jeff Kremers' conference room, of every chief judge in Milwaukee for the past 20 years.

His pro bono photography work also includes two judicial portraits, with a little assistance from Photoshop, of all 47 circuit court judges in Milwaukee, taken in 2001 and 2009.

"The other judges asked a few people who they thought might have a camera," Kahn said, "and I was the one that was dumb enough to say 'OK, I'll do it.'"

But Kahn, who presides in Milwaukee's Gun Court in the Felony Division, said he takes pride in his "assignments."

His passion for photography started with a Saturday afternoon class when he was in junior high and grew from there.

His keen eye often was disappointed during his time in private practice, however.

"I was appalled by the inadequate forensic photography that was being used," Kahn said. "In other words, lawyers would come to court with blurry pictures that never really showed what they wanted to show."

Now on the bench, his vantage point has changed, but Kahn has maintained his eye for a good photo, whether in court or out.

Wisconsin Law Journal: If you could develop one CLE course for credit, what would it be about?

Charles Kahn: One would be the overall place of the legal system in our democracy and how that plays a part in governmental and communal affairs. To be more specific, it's the courts. How courts really fit into society.

WLJ: What was your least favorite course in law school and why?

Kahn: I hated legal writing. The third-year student in charge of my section kept pointing out everything wrong with my work. It was great and effective education, but not fun.

WLJ: What do you consider your biggest achievement to date and why?

Kahn: I've had a lot of little accomplishments, but haven't reached the greatest yet. I'm proud to have been a part of getting CCAP to publish case information on the Internet.

It was a thrill for me to obtain a private pilot's license in my 50s. I would like to believe that the cumulative effect of my work as a lawyer and a judge, touching the lives of people over 37 years, has been an accomplishment as well.

WLJ: What is the one luxury item you cannot live without?

Kahn: My iPhone.

WLJ: What do you miss most about your childhood?

Kahn: I really like being grown up. I had a great childhood, but don't miss it.

WLJ: What is the first concert you went to?

Kahn: It was a motivational concert by the great activist folksinger Pete Seeger. It was in Washington, D.C. and I was a student at George Washington University, and it would have been in the late '60s, probably about 1969.

WLJ: If you could trade places with someone for a day, who would it be and why?

Kahn: Rush Limbaugh. I'd set the record straight.

WLJ: What is your motto?

Kahn: I find there is goodness in every person and try to keep that mind every day.

WLJ: If you could be a superhero, who would you be and why?

Kahn: In terms of comic book superheroes, I don't really know a lot of them. I grew up loving Superman and really wished I had a cape and everything. But there are real superheroes who I would aspire to be like. Clarence Darrow for example, or a really fine lawyer like Abraham Lincoln; these are superheroes.

WLJ: If you hadn't become a lawyer, what career would you have chosen?

Kahn: I've always wanted to be a diplomat and to represent the United States with people of different cultures and countries.