



Jim Stingl | In My Opinion

Judge Chuck Kahn has kept his focus on justice for all



Judge Chuck Kahn

Chuck Kahn, who had his own way of doing things and was one of the quirkiest judges in Milwaukee County, is stepping down after more than two decades.

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In the summer of 1966, high school student Chuck Kahn joined civil rights activist James Groppi and his followers to protest the Eagles Club's whites-only policy.

Night after night, they walked back and forth in front of the homes of Milwaukee County judges who belonged to the club.

The judges no doubt wished he would just go home, but Kahn was honing his own sense of justice that would lead him to a spot on the bench 26 years later.

Kahn, 64, stopped by my office Monday to say he'll be stepping down this month after 21 years as a judge, and to talk about his sometimes quirky view of how to run a courtroom.

It all starts at the front door. Kahn dislikes the unfriendly sign posted on every courtroom door, the one warning that food, drink, cellphones and pagers will not be tolerated inside.

Kahn made his own sign saying, "Welcome! This is an open and public courtroom! Please walk in." He posted it on top of the other sign. Somehow his courtroom managed to remain orderly and relatively free of dining and chatting.

"It's hard enough for people to figure out how to get into the courthouse and through security. It's a real pain," he said.

Kahn said he always comes into court through the public entrance rather than a private back door. And when court starts for the day, there is no command of hear ye or please rise. "Our clerk just yells out, 'Court's in session. Please remain seated,'" he said.

He's not saying other

judges are doing it wrong. It's a matter of style and personal preference and keeping it real for the people who come to court for civil or criminal cases.

Kahn, who worked in the past as a public defender and in private practice, was first elected judge in 1992 after campaigning heavily with television ads.

Just months after beginning the job, Kahn decided to find out what life was like for people he sentenced to jail. So he arranged to spend five nights locked up at the Huber work-release center downtown. His pretend offense was an OWI, and his jail name was Frederick Junior.

"It ended up being two nights, but then after that there was a rumor that there was a judge staying at the Huber facility, and they thought that might be a safety issue," Kahn recalled.

His impression: Jail life — at least the work-release version of it — didn't seem so bad.

Kahn rejects the notion that a judge is anything special or even necessarily honorable, as people often say. "I try to be a regular person, just a participant in the process," he said.

He said he wears a robe in court because it reminds him of the need for impartiality, "as opposed to some awesome authority figure like Darth Vader." And he has never warmed to the tradition of judges sitting on an elevated platform.

"The longer I've been doing this job, the more that bothers me that I'm up so high rather than being at the same level so we can talk eyeball to eyeball with the people involved," he said.

Court proceedings are full of legal jargon, but Kahn said that usually leaves the average person confused. Don't say the court, which sounds like the room, if you mean the judge. And chambers sounds like a torture dungeon. He calls it his office behind the courtroom. Voir dire? Just say jury selection.

Speaking of jurors, I wrote a column in 2011 about Kahn marrying a couple who fell in love while serving on a drug case jury in his courtroom.

Kahn took on another role during his years on the bench — judicial photographer. He shoots the official photos of the chief judges. In 2001 and again in 2009, the judges wanted a group photo but didn't want to spend any money. So camera enthusiast Kahn stepped in and took the photos, even photo-shopping absent judges into the final picture and replacing sour faces with happier ones from other frames.

"Everyone looks good," he said, not an easy outcome when you have 47 judges standing in a group. And to think it was accomplished by the guy who once picketed in front of judges' houses.

Kahn will be halfway into his current six-year term when he leaves Nov. 22. He plans to work in the field of mediation and arbitration. An election to fill his seat will be held in April. Meanwhile, the governor may choose to appoint someone to the post.

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