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great performances

Judge Paula Manderfield has juggled several successful careers with parenthood and given greatly of her personal time to charitable organizations, and to this we say, well done!

BY JENNIPHER RUTLEDGE MARTINEZ

Paula Jean Manderfield was born in Houghton, Mich., which is in the Upper Peninsula. She is the eighth of 12 children. Her father, Matt, was an engineer and owned and operated a chicken hatchery. Her mother, Florence, was a homemaker. They were happily married for 49 years until he passed on in 1995. There are 33 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

About her childhood, Judge Manderfield recalls, “A milkman delivered 12 quarts a day in the old fashioned glass bottles. A bakery delivered bread, and of course, we ate a lot of eggs!” All of the children attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. The girls wore classic navy blue uniforms, each having a white Peter Pan collar and a beret.

Due to her solid grades in high school, she was accepted to Michigan Tech in Houghton. She entered the nursing pro-

gram, which had just been acquired from the hospital in neighboring Hancock. She earned her associate’s degree, graduating *cum laude* in May 1975 and worked as a Registered Nurse (R.N.) for a year in Houghton. Along the way, she had married her high school sweetheart when she was 19, and had her first son, Rudy, when she was 21.

She moved to East Lansing to complete her B.S. in nursing at MSU. This would allow her to advance further in her career with greater responsibility and increased pay. By this time, although she was divorced, she and her ex-husband were able to share in the care and raising of their son.

While attending MSU, she worked as an R.N. at Ingham Regional Medical Center. She thrived on the fast-paced environment of the intensive care unit working with open-heart patients. She loved the immediate satisfaction of critical care nursing. “By the end of your shift,” she recalled, “you



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pretty much knew if your patient was going to live.”

For some time, she had thought about graduate school. Living in Lansing, she applied to Thomas M. Cooley Law School where she went on to complete her J.D. in eight semesters. She worked her way through law school as a nursing supervisor and graduated in the top third of her 1982 class. During her last year of law school, she “had the pleasure of working at an all-female law firm in Flint, Michigan.” There, she combined her background in nursing and law by reviewing medical case files.

After passing the bar on her first attempt, she worked for a solo practitioner for three years doing primarily personal injury cases. After that, she had a private practice for seven years. Her caseload consisted of some personal injury and workers’ comp, but her bread and butter, like many solo practitioners, was divorce and custody, and general family law. In 1990, she finished third of six in a race for an open seat on the Ingham County Circuit Court. In 1992, she was elected to the 54-A District Court bench and served there for eight years.

In 1993, she met her husband, David Murphy Gilstrap at a charity golf outing in Laingsburg. He had recently moved here from Texas to teach turf management at MSU. Two years later, they were married in Hawaii, where she took her husband’s middle name and became Paula J. M. Manderfield. They have three children: Madeline, who is 3 1/2, and twins Harrison and Katherine who are 21 months old. Rudy, after graduating from MSU with a degree in criminal justice, joined the Coast Guard and is in basic training at Cape May, New Jersey.

Knowing Manderfield wanted to someday move to a higher court, a group of attorneys approached her last year about running for circuit court against two long-time incumbents. After giving it a great deal of thought, she agreed it was time for a change. She and her husband campaigned relentlessly from February right through November 7, when she was the runaway top vote getter. Her motivation to run for the circuit court bench was definitely not money – the difference in salary is about \$1,500 annually.

She said the difference between serving in district court and circuit court is first, obviously, the different kinds of cases; the second is the sheer volume of cases in district court. Because of this judicial experience, she feels that she will be very adept at moving the circuit court docket at an appropriate speed. Though Judge Manderfield is more than willing to give cases the time they need, and to try cases when needed, she said she will also push her docket appropriately. For instance, she recently sent out a large number of No Progress Calls (with more going out in the next few weeks) in order to resolve some of the cases that have been open for some time.

When asked what has had the biggest impact on her since being elected to the higher court where she is assigned to the Family Division, she talked about how difficult it is to handle cases involving the abuse and neglect of children. She is shocked by what people will say in open court, adding “Sometimes I feel like I’m on the Jerry Springer show, especially in dealing with people who are representing themselves.”

Judge Manderfield calls her judicial assistant, Rebecca Taylor, her sergeant and gatekeeper. While still in private practice, she hired Becky right out of her LCC Paralegal Program. Judge

Manderfield appreciates her strong work ethic and ability to work well with the public. Her law clerk, attorney Gary McNeal, also a transplant from District Court, is a Lieutenant in the Army Reserves and a karate black belt; he keeps the office running smoothly. Her court reporter is Dorothy (Doty) Dungey. Judge Manderfield says “Doty is an experienced court reporter who has worked in state and federal courts, and I’m very pleased to have her with me.”

Although Judge Manderfield is busy handling her case load in court, she is also attending many training seminars, including new judges’ school (again). She noted that much domestic law is coming back to her from her days in private practice. She says, “I’m looking forward to serving as a circuit court judge for many years and working with attorneys who practice in areas to which I was not exposed during my tenure as a district judge.”

Judge Manderfield believes it is important for elected officials, including judges, to give back to the community and to remain sensitive to the community they serve. She has particularly enjoyed being a board member for the following organizations: Community Corrections Advisory Board, Blue Care Network of Michigan, YMCA Metropolitan Board, Advent House Ministries, Ronald McDonald House of Mid-Michigan, and the Women Business Owners of Greater Lansing (past-president). She is currently president-elect of the American Heart Association, local affiliate. ■

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