

## EXAMINER PROFILE: Rufus G. King III, chief judge of the D.C. Superior Court

## Passion from the bench

## Judge follows his father's footsteps to a life in law

BY BILL MYERS

Examiner Staff Writer

Every day, Rufus G. King III, chief judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, puts on black robes and goes to work. The outfit suits him: Long and lean, with a rich, deep, whispering voice and a stern jaw, he resembles Gregory Peck's Atticus Finch in the 1962

## STATISTICS

## Rufus G. King III

**Born:** June 16, 1942, in New Haven, Conn.

**Education:** Princeton University, bachelor's degree in biology, 1966; Georgetown University Law Center, 1971

**Career:** Sole practitioner, 1971-84; judge, Superior Court of D.C., 1984-2000; chief judge, Superior Court, 2000-present

**Family:** Married, one son

film "To Kill a Mockingbird." But as the conversation moves away from the practice of law and into the origins of the universe or the latest in information technology, you feel he could easily be suited for a lab coat or a professor's cardigan.

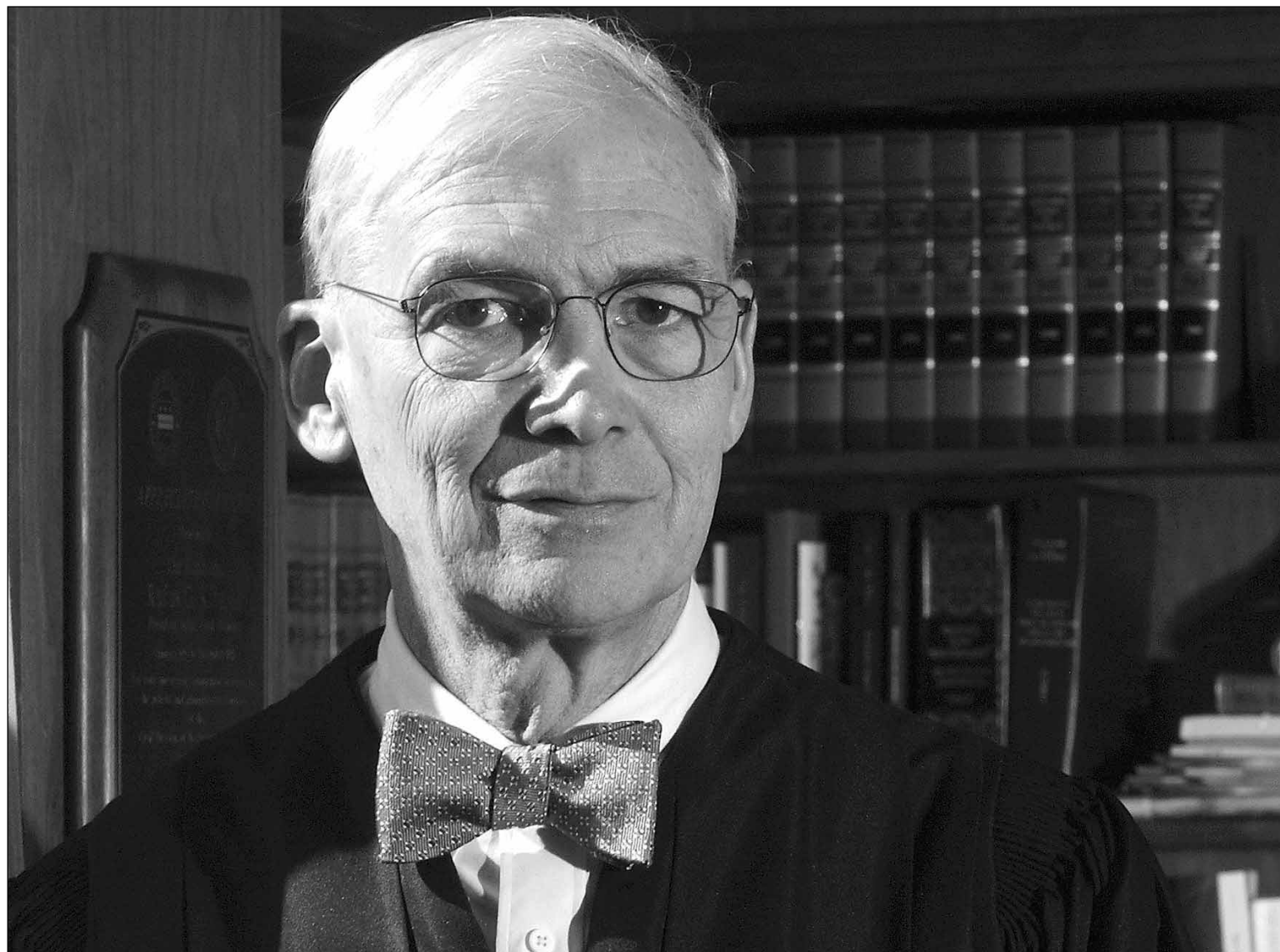
King comes by his polymath's manner honestly. His father, Rufus G. King Jr., was a general law practitioner who developed a niche representing pinball manufacturers. His mother was a gifted artist.

But King's head isn't in the clouds. As a judge, he was the force behind the courts' technology committee, helping drag it into the 21st century. He also helped draft guidelines for child support, which he thinks "completely turned around" a bad situation. Now 63, King has spent most of his adult life as a lawyer in the District and more than half of his career as a judge in the District.

**Q: Why did you go to law school?**

**A:** I finished college and thought a little bit about graduate school and decided that I didn't want to do that. I came to work at the courts. I was actually first a bailiff and then in the clerk's office, and then I clerked, first for Austin Fickling and then [William] Pryor. [Fickling] went to the Court of Appeals, and since I was still in law school, I went to clerk for Judge Pryor, who was appointed to replace him.

In the process of working with the courts and going through those clerkships, I was seeing something



Jeff Mankie/Examiner

Rufus G. King III, chief judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, has spent most of his adult life as a lawyer in the District.

that I really liked and was enthusiastic about.

**Q: What was that?**

**A:** The public service notion — that had always appealed to me. My father was a lawyer and I had sort of absorbed a fair amount through osmosis. It was the idea that you could get involved in a situation and make it come out better for folks. And from the beginning, clerking with Bill Pryor, I saw that the bench was a great place to do that. I loved working for him and I could see that it would be a real satisfying and constructive way to spend one's time.

**Q: Are you glad you did it?**

**A:** Very much, looking at what I've been able to accomplish as a lawyer and a judge. As a private lawyer, my practice was a small, general practice, so it was people-oriented.

My clients were individuals with one kind of trouble or another, or one kind of project or another. Again, the same kind of thing: I could really get involved and make things go better.

**"I haven't had the monster, high-profile trials, but I've had some significant cases. I love working with jurors because you're taking the law into the community."****Q: Any cases that stand out?**

**A:** As a civil litigator, your job is to keep your clients away from court as much as possible. And I think I was pretty successful at that. What I remember fondly were, ironically, some of the divorces I handled — where we really solved some situations or made really bad situations kind of less bad.

**Q: Have you enjoyed your time on the bench?**

**A:** It's turned out to be everything I thought it would be. I haven't had the monster, high-profile trials, but I've had some significant cases. I love working with jurors because you're taking the law into the community. You're taking the law away from lawyers talking to each other and you're communicating with people who

bring only their common sense to the job — and you have to make that work.

**Q: How have the courts changed since you've been practicing law?**

**A:** I think everything has gotten more complex. Part of it is the law continues to get more complex. I think it was Oliver Wendell Holmes who said that the law restates itself every 20 years. I think now the time period is about seven or eight years.

When I started in practice, I was sworn in on the bar on a Thursday, I think it was, and just to celebrate I showed up in a courtroom and a judge appointed me to a case and I was practicing law. You can't do that anymore.

**Q: What do you do when you're**

## KING'S PICKS

- Restaurant: Judges' dining room
- Fast-food joint: "None that I would admit to!"
- Book: "There are too many to carry."
- Movie: Federico Fellini's "8 1/2"
- Play: Anything by Shakespeare
- Vacation spot: Fisher's Island, N.Y.
- Actor: Gary Cooper
- Actress: Grace Kelly
- Role model: My father, U.S. Court of Appeals Judge William Pryor
- Hobbies: Skiing, cello, reading, running

**not on the job?**

**A:** I like skiing. I play adequate cello. And reading. My idea of heaven ... is a pile of books I've been meaning to get to and someplace like a beach or a mountain cabin somewhere.

bmyers@dcexaminer.com