



A CONVERSATION WITH CHIEF JUDGE RUFUS KING, III

It is the middle of a sunny Tuesday afternoon in June, and the Moultrie Courthouse is buzzing. A line of people wait to go through the security checkpoint, lawyers, jurors, parties, court-house staff – and who knows who else – ride the escalators up and down, mill around the hallways, talk to each other. A crowd of jurors listen to instructions so they'll know if they are sitting on a jury or going home; two lawyers are arguing - passionately, colorfully, using words one doesn't expect to hear so loudly in court - over the Celtics.

And in an unmarked office on the third floor, there is calm. Large offices with pictures of sunsets on them; large windows that look over the city. It is in a large sunny book-and-award filled office that Chief Judge Rufus G. King, III – dapper in his trademark bow tie - has his chambers, at least until the end of September when he will step down at the end of his second term as Chief Judge.

Chief Judge King became Chief Judge King on September 29, 2000, after working in private practice, then becoming a Superior Court judge at the D.C. Superior Court in 1984, then becoming Presiding Judge of the Civil Division from January 1997 until January 1999.

Moving from judging to being the chief administrator of one of the government's largest and most complicated institutions was a big change.

"The first thing I did was to survive the process," he says.

After surviving the process he set out to conquer his big issues: getting more resources for the Family Court, increasing the Court's budget, strategic planning, improving the Court's IT system. But Chief Judge King didn't know how to navigate Capitol Hill – how to get the Feds to give the Court the resources it needed.

"Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton – she had to educate me," he says. "That was a tough job. She wasn't always gentle about it but she was right. She was on our oversight/authorizing subcommittee. She of course knew and understood the collision of interests – the political pushes – that I didn't, many of us at the Court didn't."

But Chief Judge King learned, and, he says, "in fact what happened after a very rapid learning curve on the Hill is we were given a better structure and more resources."

"I think the Family Court has gone through a major improvement," says Chief Judge King. "We were given three additional judges for that court and nine magistrate judges. Now we have enough time to really think about cases and manage them. And, at the same time we were doing that, the city was really strengthening its role, so I think the combination has led to substantial improvements. We'll have taken a giant step forward thanks to that effort."

On top of improvements to the Family Court, Chief Judge King has overseen strategic planning at the court, as well as a massive overhaul of the Court's IT system so that all the different courts – family, probate, civil, criminal, landlord-tenant; all of them – are linked. This way, when a family court judge wants to know if someone's been evicted, they can look it up from the bench; if a civil court judge wants to know if there is a protective order against a party, they can look it up from the bench.

There's more to be done, says Chief Judge King, though the more might be left for his successor. "The one that I'm just getting started on now is performance standards," he says. "It is an area that I might not see through in my term. The challenge is that you want to improve the timeliness of case management – you want to get the fat out of the system. At the same time the great thing about our system of justice is that an independent judge has the time to make discretionary calls, and you don't want to lose that. On other fronts, I think we're seeing more and more pro se litigants – that's going to be a challenge. I think we're in a world where we have to become more sophisticated in the international community. Not only providing interpreter services but understanding different cultures and being accessible to different cultures."

"I'd say it's very much with mixed emotions that I leave, because I really have enjoyed it," says Chief Judge King. "The bench is just such an unbelievable opportunity. From the day that I first came on the bench there hasn't been a single day I would have traded for working anywhere else as hard as it can be. I've been very lucky. Very fortunate."

After September Chief Judge King in all likelihood becomes Senior Judge King – he has applied for senior judge status, and is hoping to continue on the bench, hearing cases and "having some fun on the court," he says. That, and having some fun off the bench, "Being able to travel when I want to travel, sit when I want to sit, do what I want to do."

But before September there is still work to be done, and on this sunny June day Chief Judge King's airy waiting room is full of people in suits holding legal pads waiting to meet about judicial standards.
