

Judge Rudd Bids Farewell

By Merri Rudd, for May 11, 2009, Albuquerque Journal, Business Outlook

The front page of the newspaper is filled with stories about political scandals, alleged financial chicanery, and dishonest people in positions of trust. I have heard numerous people complain that “every elected official is a crook” and politicians should all lose their jobs.

Hearing this offends me.

There are many dedicated public servants, both nationally and within New Mexico. The problem is you don’t often read about them on the front page of the newspaper. The same holds true for doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers, and religious leaders. You usually hear only about the ones who are in trouble.

Doing one’s job well and ethically is not front page news. Yet I look around New Mexico, where I have lived for 26 years, and I see fine elected officials, at the federal, state, county, and city levels.

I wanted to be a probate judge because I had worked with senior citizens and practiced elder law for years. The probate court serves many *pro se* customers, *i.e.*, those who do not have attorneys. Being a probate judge with limited jurisdiction (if you are going to fight over someone’s estate, it will happen in the district court) has given me an opportunity to serve the public without the adversarial nature of contested cases.

During my stint as probate judge, the court’s caseload has increased from 217 cases in 2000 to 478 cases last year. We are the only probate court in the state with an online court docket system, searchable from the comfort of one’s home via the Internet. I have publicized the court through my former “Judge is In” show on Gov-TV, my column in the *Albuquerque Journal*, and various speaking engagements. I have not appeared on the front page of the newspaper.

I’m just doing my job.

During the past thirty years I have learned much from my mentors: from Bill Meadows, my first boss, that it was okay to be an intelligent woman and to challenge your boss, but, even more important, to have a social conscience; from John Beasley, a former Vanderbilt University dean, who told me my ability to think unconventionally was my greatest gift; from the late Virginia Sears, New Mexican senior advocate and activist, that I should strive to be generous, community-minded, humble, and hopeful; from the late Justice Pamela Minzner, that integrity and a generous heart are paramount.

Long ago I accepted that most of us will not achieve greatness or fame or historical note. The small contributions we each make are what count in our lives. When we wake up each day, we choose whether to have a good or bad attitude, whether to act ethically or unethically, whether to hold a grudge or not, whether to find balance or not, whether to pay attention to the world, our family, our job, or anything else.

There are also things we do not choose. My aunt, whom I have assisted for more than 15 years, has breast cancer that has metastasized to her liver and bones. I have been travelling back and forth to Florida to help her and have learned far too much about the caregiver side of elder care issues, bio-ethics debates, and end-of-life planning. My twenty-plus years of elder law experience have not prepared me for this difficult journey. Now I choose to focus more on my aunt’s needs and, to that end, not to renew my contract with the *Albuquerque Journal*.

My first column appeared on July 12, 2001, and I have written 188 columns since then. As Bernalillo County's part-time probate judge during the past eight years, I have presided over more than 3,000 cases and 350 weddings. I will handle hundreds more cases before my term ends.

Because county officers, such as probate judges, are term-limited, my ten-year stint ends on December 31, 2010. I will continue to update my book *Life Planning in New Mexico*, which I hope will be a helpful resource for years to come.

What I do after that remains to be seen.

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To those who have stopped me in the YMCA shower, the grocery, and the street to let me know you enjoy reading my column, thanks for egging me on. To the scores of readers who sent letters and emails asking questions, I couldn't have done it without you. To the readers who corrected my grammar, my Vanderbilt English major salutes you. And to my *Journal* editor Mike Murphy and the copy and headline editors, deep thanks for this opportunity to serve the community.

As poet T.S. Eliot wrote long ago in the *Four Quartets*:

"Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers."

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(Previous columns are available for free at the court's website,
www.bernco.gov/probate.)