

Judge strives for easy mood in courtroom

By C.L. Rugenstein
staff writer

A very large gavel, with a handle as long as a yardstick, sits atop a bookcase in Oakland Circuit Court Judge Edward Sosnick's office.

A deterrent for hard core contempt of court cases?

No.

"I used it when I talked to kids about the Constitution (two years ago)," Sosnick said.

It was part of a special program Sosnick developed for schools for the Constitution's bicentennial celebration.

Dressed in his black judge's robe and carrying the huge gavel, Sosnick entered the classrooms as Igor the Great from Outer Slobovia.

Dividing the class into two groups — one like a dictatorship, and one a democracy, he conducted a mock trial to teach children about the value of their constitutional rights.

It's just one of the ways Sosnick has tried to take the austerity out of law, and make the courtroom "more comfortable" for average citizens who appear before him.

"I TRY to create a dignified but comfortable atmosphere, where people can feel more at ease."

He uses humor a lot, he said.

Like the time a divorcing couple were fighting over who would get a certain rug.

He asked them to describe the rug. When they did, he said, "Well, if neither of you want it, can I have it?"

SOSNICK TRIES to hear between the lines — the things feuding spouses and unhappy children are saying without putting them into words.

"One of the key things is you have to listen, listen, listen. And then when you feel like you can't stand it any longer you have to listen some more."

Particularly in cases of divorce, where people need to vent feelings. "When they're arguing about pots and pans, they're not really arguing about pots and pans. It's only the tip of the iceberg."

HIS CONCERN with divorce and its effects broadened when he won election to the circuit court in 1988. But his interest in families, children and the problems that disrupt them began before.

While on the 48th District bench, Sosnick helped develop the SOAP program — Significant Others Awareness Program for alcohol abusers and their spouses or other significant people in their lives.

He's now concentrating on making divorce a livable and less painful experience for children.

IN MARCH he helped kick off a cooperative program between the circuit court and Oakland Friend of the Court office.

He was co-founder with Birmingham attorney Richard Victor of SMILE — Start Making It Livable for Everyone.

It's an educational workshop to provide divorcing parents with information to help their children survive the trauma of divorce. (See related story.)

"The courts deal with the offender, but not the whole family. The best way to protect the public is to get the whole family in shape."

HIS CONCERN for children goes back to his college beginnings. Sosnick grew up in Detroit, graduating from Mumford High School.

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— Judge Edward Sosnick

He planned at first to be a doctor, then a teacher after two years at the University of Michigan. However, after transferring to Wayne State University, he decided his skills were in communications, so he decided to be a lawyer.

He worked as a village, township and city attorney before being recruited by former Oakland County prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson for his staff.

He then served four years on the 48th District Court bench, first elected despite a drunk driving arrest to which he promptly pleaded guilty and went through treatment.

HIS FIRST case was the nationally known King Boots trial, in which a champion sheepdog was accused of fatally mauling an elderly woman. Solomon-like, Sosnick gave the owners a choice: They could neuter the dog, have its teeth pulled and keep it confined — or have it put to sleep.

The owners chose the former, but the dog died a year later, Sosnick said.

"I hope they didn't blame me," he said.

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JOHN STORMZAND/staff photographer

Judge Edward Sosnick uses humor to help create "a comfortable atmosphere, where people can feel more at ease."

SMILE aims at 'liveable' divorce

By Katie Maple McBride
special writer

Jenny was a fun-loving 4-year-old until her parents divorced. Her father moved away from home and each time she visited him, he argued with her mother.

Jenny blamed herself for their anger and feared both parents would abandon her. She clung to her mother when she left her at day school, and began wetting her bed.

Such sad scenarios are more and more common today, with half of the marriages in the United States ending in divorce. A new program sponsored by the Oakland County Circuit Court hopes to reduce the trauma of divorce for children by educating their parents.

Called "Start Making It Livable for Everyone" (SMILE), the program is a first for Michigan and only the second to be offered in the nation. The two-hour workshop is being held monthly for divorced parents with minor children in Oakland County.

"How children do after divorce depends, to a large degree, on how their parents behave, and their parents' attitudes toward each other," explained Judge Edward Sosnick of the Oakland County Circuit Court.

SO SOSNICK joined forces with Birmingham attorney Richard Victor to start the SMILE program. They formed a steering committee of divorce counselors, psychologists and representatives of the Oakland County Friend of the Court. Beginning last December, the committee of volunteers met twice a month to plan the program. "There are rules for property splits and custody splits, but there aren't any rules for how to deal with parenting time and the other issues that surface when you get divorced and have children," Victor said.



Richard Victor

"The parents' actions have a direct effect on children, and no one has been there to provide guidance. This program provides that guidance."

About 50 people attended the first SMILE seminar the last week in March. The initial session was a pilot program. In the future, as many as 300 people will be invited to the monthly workshops.

The seminar included several presentations on the impact of divorce on children. Psychologists and counselors discussed the grief process for divorced parents and their children, the impact of divorce by developmental stages of children and what parents can do to diffuse the effects of the split family.

Participants also learned the children's perspective through a videotaped dialogue between young people whose parents were divorced. The seminar concluded with a review of the services available through Oakland County Friend of the Court and a question-and-answer period.

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