

A legacy of fairness and compassion

Community, colleagues remember Judge Pierce

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COSHOCTON — Judge Jason Given of Coshocton County Probate and Juvenile Court held his hands out on the desk in his office. He felt the enduring presence of a predecessor and mentor who once sat at the same desk. Perhaps even more now upon his passing.

"He's one of those people, you want to think of about a thousand things to say about him, but really he was just such a nice guy, a good person and community driven that it's hard to find the right words. I think that speaks volumes unto itself," Given offered.

Clifton Fenning "Fenn" Pierce died Dec. 1 at the age of 78. He served as judge of Coshocton County Probate and Juvenile Court from 1981 to 2009. He also served on many boards and received several awards for his service on the bench and to the community over the years. Additionally, he was named

Coshoctonian by the Coshocton County Chamber of Commerce in 2013.

The Coshocton native was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in 2013 and was most recently living in the Cincinnati area. A local celebration of life will be held sometime in the spring.

"To sit here at this desk, the desk he sat at for many, many years, and try my best to carry on the legacy he built for this court, and he really did. He was greatly admired by juvenile and probate judges across the state of Ohio," Given said.

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Former Judge C. Fenning Pierce of the Coshocton County Probate and Juvenile Court died Dec. 1 at the age of 78. He served on the bench from 1981 to 2009. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Judge Pierce

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Given attended a conference shortly after Pierce died and he talked with three judges who had worked with Pierce. They echoed the feelings of many who always spoke of Pierce's kindness.

"He was a man who carried himself

with grace and a man who showed everybody who came into this courthouse compassion and mercy, but he stayed within the law and upheld the law and held people to account all at the same time. To be a judge and balance those two things is a real skill, a real talent. He was a very talented jurist that way," Given said. "What you want, and I think he was really good at, was you want (those who come to court) to feel like they were heard, that they got their day in court

and the judge gave them full consideration before making a decision. I think he was incredibly talented at that. I think you would be hard pressed to find anyone who came in here under any sort of contested action who would say 'he really didn't treat me fair.'

Fair decision maker

Given considered Pierce a mentor and he strives everyday to live up to the example set by Pierce. When Given returned to Coshocton as a young attorney to practice law, much of what he did was probate work. He was in Pierce's courtroom nearly everyday.

"You were always held to account when you were in here. You had to be prepared. If you weren't doing things right, he was going to let you know you weren't doing things right. But it was a great, safe place to come as a young lawyer and have somebody with that much compassion who will allow you to learn even through your mistakes," Given said.



Former Judge C. Fenning Pierce is seen with the Coshoctonian Award he received in 2013 from the Coshocton County Chamber of Commerce. Pierce served on many boards, committees in Coshocton. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Court Administrator Doug Schonauer is one of four employees still with the court from when Pierce was judge. He recalled a parent from a juvenile case approaching him years later. They told Schonauer they didn't agree with everything Pierce did in the case, but they respected his decision and understood the ruling.

"He was extremely thorough in his work and did not make hasty decisions. He reviewed all information that was available to him and would take various positions into consideration before passing judgment in a case," Schonauer shared.

Family oriented

Schonauer said Pierce was also very family oriented, which served him well on the bench.

"If a staff member had a child sick at home, or any other unplanned emergent situation, he always said 'go take care of your family first, we will be OK here,'" Schonauer remembered. "He also used the same philosophy for his family and talked often to his daughters and wife to make sure that all was OK with whatever was happening in their personal lives."

Amy Crown was serving her first year as executive director of the Coshocton County Chamber of Commerce when the prestigious Coshoctonian Award was given to Pierce. She thought it was a good omen, as Crown had been his neighbor for many years. She vividly remembers what Pierce said to her the day after the chamber banquet.

"He quietly told me how embarrassed he was that the speech highlighting his life and career took so long. That I believe was Fenn Pierce, always modest even when being celebrated," she said.

She too commented on how important family was to him, even the families of others.

"What I will remember most is the

children caught the school bus at the end of his driveway and, usually every morning, he made time to greet them, ask about their classes and encourage them. He truly cared."

Pierce and his wife, Carol, were married for 56 years and had three children, Hallie, Kara and Jordan. Hallie said her the man on the bench and her father were much the same.

"My dad was truly the most incredible father — smart, empathetic, kind and wonderfully witty. He had a steady, thoughtful presence and a deep emotional intelligence that made people feel understood and supported. He was the best listener you could imagine, someone who took the time to really hear you and respond with insight and care," she said. "He lived out his values every day — kindness, fairness, humility and a deep compassion for others. Those qualities shaped not only the kind of father he was to us, but also the kind of person he was to everyone who crossed his path."

One memory stands out for Hallie that is how well known her father was for helping children appearing in his courtroom to adopt their dolls. Overall, handling adoptions was one of his favorite tasks as a judge, Hallie confided.

"As a judge, he handled thousands of adoptions over the years, and those were truly some of his favorite days. He was well known for helping children adopt their Cabbage Patch dolls — something he approached with the same warmth and sincerity as any other adoption. He understood how special those moments were to kids, and it showed his blend of compassion, humor and heart."

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