



JUDICIAL PROFILE OF JUDGE DONALD HAFELE

by Yvette Trelles

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A practicing attorney since 1982, Judge Don Hafele, was elevated to the County Court bench April 1, 1999. Initially he served in the Criminal Division of the County Court, then in May, 2000, he was asked to become the Deputy Administrative Judge of the Civil Division because of his experience in civil litigation and law firm management prior to being on the bench. One of Judge Hafele's finest characteristics on the bench is his professionalism and his ability to not show bias to either party during proceedings. He is a gentleman at all times and prides himself on his passion for his work.

Judge Hafele was born and raised in Teaneck, NJ. His parents, Justine and Donald Hafele, raised him and his sister, Maryann, in the suburbs outside New York in Rockland County, NY. He has very fond memories of his childhood and speaks proudly of his late father and family. In fact, Judge Hafele attributes pursuing his law degree to his father whom he admires deeply. His father was a United States Marshall in Washington DC and then later worked for New York State as an insurance fraud investigator. Judge Hafele felt he would follow in his father's footsteps but then realized the natural progression of him attending college and pursuing a law degree. Judge Hafele reflects fondly stating his father who grew up during the Depression, would have wanted to be an attorney that only fueled his desire to become an attorney more.

Judge Hafele attended college at the University of Miami and graduated in 1979 Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts Degree. Thereafter, he attended law school again at the University of Miami (a die hard Hurricane fan as you might imagine!) where he eventually became President of the Student Government of the law school. The most disappointing moment, states Judge Hafele, is that his father passed away in 1982 and did not see him graduate from law school.

Judge Hafele states while it was a difficult time for him after his father's death, he found being President of the Student Bar Association to be a wonderful experience. Finances were extremely difficult after his father became ill and due to his Presidency, he was awarded a full scholarship at the law school. His proudest moment in law school was speaking at the Inauguration of President of the University of Miami, Edward T. Foote.

Judge Hafele's mother still lives in New Jersey residing with his sister and her family. However, Judge Hafele never returned up north after law school. He became an Associate with the Law Firm of Wicker, Smith practicing insurance defense litigation. Thereafter, he eventually became a Partner at the Law Firm of Reid, Ricca and Rigell where he practiced from 1985 through 1993. He then went on to practice with Reid, Price, Hafele and Cameron. In January, 1994, Judge Hafele began his own practice specializing in plaintiff's personal injury as well as defense litigation and corporate work. He stayed in his own practice until he came on the bench in April, 1999. It was the second time Judge Hafele had put in an application to become a judge and he has not regretted it for one moment!

When asked why he wanted to become a judge, Judge Hafele states throughout the years he had done many, many hours of pro-bono work. He realized doing pro-bono work was as rewarding as the work he did for paying clients and sometimes even more so. In an effort to fulfill his desire to do service work and stay focused on the law, it was only natural that he should apply to become a judge in Palm Beach County.

Judge Hafele has enjoyed immensely his time on the bench. What he enjoyed most about the Criminal Division of County Court was that he felt he was helping people. Judge Hafele states many of the defendants in Criminal County Court are either addicts and/or alcoholics. He proudly reflects on the letters received from many of the defendants. He states he has received several letters thanking him for the recommendations and even the sentencing he gave them. It has changed their lives, and in turn Judge Hafele sees he has made a difference. He strongly believes in rehabilitation rather than jail for misdemeanants suffering from addiction not only because it helps the defendants, but it is helping the community. After a lot of research, he believes the Sheriff's Drug Farm is one of the most beneficial programs for those convicted. Not only is it emotionally stimulating but it is educational and physically challenging. Following in Judge Mary Lupo's footsteps, Judge Hafele has gone out on various occasions to see the defendants he has sentenced to make sure they are doing well in the program.

Since being in the Civil Division of County Court, he has regularly contributed to the Civil Drug Court that was started by Judge Rodgers. He presides over that program on Saturday mornings and believes strongly that having judges there makes a difference for the parties involved and the community. What has astounded him the most after becoming a judge is seeing so many pro-se litigants coming in who actually live paycheck to paycheck. He says being a judge has opened his eyes quite a bit which has helped him focus even more on helping people. He is a supporter of the Lord's Place and believes that more needs to be done for the homeless, especially families.

When Judge Hafele is not on the bench or at one of his son's sporting activities, he teaches "at risk" students at Jefferson Davis and Gold Coast Schools. Again, Judge Hafele believes the time he donates to this program may help juveniles to stay away from drugs and criminal activity sometime in the future. Twice a year he has the students visit the courthouse and once a year they do a jail tour.

His family life is his main priority, Judge Hafele states. He met his wife, Martha, while they both attended University of Miami and has been married since 1985. They have one child, Donnie, who is 13 years old attending St. Ann's Catholic School. Judge Hafele coaches Little League for his son and spends much time with his family. One of his most favorite activities is to attend all Hurricane sporting events. Judge Hafele states there are three things that mean the most to him in life:

1. God;
2. Family/friends;
3. A satisfying job.

As he sits there with a big grin on his face, he is very happy with his life. He says if you try to have all three in order, everything else generally falls into place. Judge Hafele considers himself lucky and says he's a "pretty simple guy". He may be simple, but his priorities are certainly in order. Just talking to him you realize he is in the right place! Good luck on the bench, Judge Hafele. May you make a difference in more people's lives than you realize.

