



Judge Gary L. Vonhof
By: Thomas Hoadley
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Only one of our Judges, Judge Gary Vonhof, has been to the North Pole. It all started in Holland a few years ago. Friesland is a land windswept by the North Sea. It anchors the Great Afaluidijk Dike, and much of that land was reclaimed by the Dutch from the sea. Judge Vonhof's grandparents left there around the turn of the century, and settled near Rochester, New York.

His parents owned a farmhouse on the highest point in Wayne County. They rented out the 140 acres, and his father worked in town. Judge Vonhof was the fourth of six children, and graduated from a rural high school.

He went into the Air Force. While stationed in Greenland, he landed at the North Pole to make a weather observation.

After his discharge, Judge Vonhof went to Calvin College in Grand Rapids. He graduated in 1969 with a B.A. in history, and went back to New York to Syracuse Law School, graduating in 1972. While a student at Calvin, he met Gloria. After her graduation in 1970, she moved to West Palm Beach, and for the next two years they had a long distance romance. He married Gloria the day he graduated from law school. He took the Florida Bar, passed, and started working in the area. In 1974, he started an eleven-year association with Danny Bakst. Judge Vonhof was in charge of the firm's small claims, Country, and collection cases. Having worked in the same building with Gary for a few years, I can attest that he dutifully left Johnson, Ackerman & Bakst every day to County court with ten to twenty files under his arm.

Since Judge Vonhof was probably the busiest lawyer in the County Court system for many years, he decided he was well adapted to be a County Court Judge. He applied for County Court Judgeships five or six times. He finally was appointed by Governor Martinez in 1987. In 1990, four Circuit Judgeships became available and he applied. Governor Martinez then appointed him Circuit Judge.

His first judicial position was with Judge Gersten in the South County Courthouse. He was supposed to do one-half probate and one-half family, but it ended up mostly family.

When Judge Rudnick got sick, Judge Vonhof was moved up to help out, and has now taken over all the probate cases.

He soon learned that although probate and guardianships involved a majority of the work; there were also many decisions to be made in substance abuse, Baker Act, protective services, and incapacity hearings. He currently has thirteen to fourteen thousand probate files open. Many of these were opened by lawyers for deceased plaintiffs, or to serve deceased defendants. Once a case is completed, and the money paid, the lawyer sometimes just "forgets" that there was an estate. Two clerks in the probate office are currently going through the old files, sending attorneys "showcause" orders to close out these estates. The Clerks are up to 1985. The Judge describes his Court as "paperwork intensive." He is required to sign hundreds of Orders every year. There is obviously a need for a magistrate system similar to the one developed in Traffic

Court. I am sure the Court could find volunteers to review simple probate ex-parte matters. This would leave Judge vonhof to work on more important matters.

Our new Probate Judge has enjoyed the move from “Boca divorces” to “Palm Beach estates”. He would like one more term as Judge; then he will be sixty-two. On retirement, he wants to “skip stones” into the lake near his home south of the Lantana airport.

When asked about his homelife, he states that he goes to a lot of basketball and volleyball games. He is 6’2”, and his wife is 6”. Their children are tall. Their oldest daughter is 6’. Their second daughter is still growing and ride horses. Being tall has its advantages in basketball and volleyball, and his kids have been real good at this. A full college basketball scholarship will save his family a lot of money.

His wife, Gloria, is a very caring person. She works for a girls’ shelter called Changing Seasons.

Judge Vonhof’s first generation parents must be very proud. Even though the elder Mr. Vonhof repaired furnaces and gutters, and Mrs. Vonhof had not completed high school, they applied their Dutch industriousness to educating their children. They must be very proud to know that their son, Gay left his family farmhouse on the highest point in Wayne County, to rise to the highest point in our legal community.