

Federal Civil Practice

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Northern District welcomes Judge John Z. Lee

BY DANIEL THIES

In the legal profession, few achievements rank as high as joining the federal bench. For John Zihun Lee, who was sworn in as a new district judge in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois on May 8, 2012, however, the milestone glitters with extra luster. An immigrant who came to the United States in 1972 at the age of four, unable to even speak English, Judge Lee rose to become the first Korean American ever to serve as an Article III federal judge in the Northern District.

Judge Lee has all the typical accomplishments of a lawyer elevated to the federal bench. A *magna cum laude* graduate of Harvard College in 1989, he proceeded to Harvard Law School, where he met President Barack Obama and graduated *cum laude* in 1992. Immediately after law school he took a prestigious job in Washington, D.C., serving in the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, before moving on to work in litigation as an associate with Mayer Brown, and then Grippo and Elden. He moved to Freeborn and Peters in 1999, where he became a partner after just two short years, the quickest ever path to the partnership in the history of the firm.

Judge Lee's greatest assets as a new

judge, however, are more unique, beginning with his experience as a young immigrant learning to adapt to a new culture. On his first day of Kindergarten in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, where his family lived after moving to the United States, his mother told him that to succeed in America, he needed an American name. Although he was not familiar with many, Judge Lee chose the name "John" and has used it ever since. But the name did not solve all of his language problems. Later that year, his teacher asked the class to bring in an empty cereal box for an art project, but young John misunderstood and showed up with a can of beans. Fortunately, the teacher had an extra box that she could share.

Judge Lee relates that those experiences taught him that although hard work is crucial to success, "opportunities exist only when people nurture them and share them with others." That lesson shapes the ethic of humility with which he approaches his new job. "It is an honor and a privilege to be in this position," he says, "but it is much more a testament to the people who have supported me than to my own hard work."

One of the most significant of the people to provide support to Judge Lee was his Eighth Grade history and literature teacher. That teacher taught him that to

make a difference in the world, one must both reason effectively to come to the truth and also be principled enough to inspire trust in others. "Truth without trust will not motivate people to follow you," says Judge Lee, "and trust without truth will not effectively bring change. But with both of those things, you can really impact people."

Later, at Harvard College, Judge Lee majored in classical studies, and he cites Homer's *Odyssey* as his favorite book. That background helped Judge Lee understand the importance of narrative to the practice of law. "In the classics, profound truths are conveyed through stories," Judge Lee explains, "and the most effective litigators marshal the facts in a case to do the same thing." Judge Lee learned firsthand how to apply that principle at law school from Professor Charles Ogletree. "He could incorporate the facts of a case to tell a compelling story from the perspective of a criminal defendant, and then turn around and use the same facts to tell a much different story from the prosecutor's side." Judge Lee's storytelling ability will no doubt be invaluable as he begins crafting opinions.

Yet another unique asset is Judge Lee's ability to bring disparate groups of people together around a common interest. Before joining the bench, Judge Lee served as a

board member and past president of the Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services (CARPLS), a secular legal aid organization that provides basic legal advice and referrals to members of underserved communities. At the same time, Judge Lee attended Willow Creek Community Church (WCC), large non-denominational evangelical Christian church in South Barrington, Illinois. Along with a couple of partners from Freeborn & Peters, Kellye Fabian and Michael Freeborn, Judge Lee noticed that there was a large population with unmet

legal needs living in the far Northwest Suburbs, and was able to bring CARPLS and WCC together to address the problem by founding a legal aid clinic in nearby Hoffman Estates. “WCC had the facilities and the legal professionals and other volunteers,” says Judge Lee, “and CARPLS had the knowledge base and infrastructure.” The clinic, which is flourishing today, is a remarkable partnership between a religious and a secular organization unified around a common goal, and a testament to Judge Lee’s vision and leadership.

All of these qualities will no doubt be

invaluable for a new federal district judge. Together, they help to shape Judge Lee’s main focus as he embarks on his new position: ensuring that he provides the best possible service to the parties that appear before him. “I strive to provide all parties with a fair, just, and efficient way of resolving disputes,” he says. “We are here not only to decide cases, but to oversee and craft a litigation process with the help of the parties that will result in a fair and just outcome.” ■

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