

CJI honors five outstanding jurists for maintaining excellence in Colorado courts

By Bob Ewegen

Denver – Five outstanding jurists were honored for upholding Colorado’s tradition of fair, impartial and accountable courts before an audience of 700 civic leaders at the Colorado Judicial Institute’s 11th Annual Judicial Excellence for Colorado Dinner October 15 at the Marriott City Center in Denver.

CJI honored members of Colorado’s appellate courts, giving Distinguished Judicial Leadership Awards to Chief Justice Michael Bender of the Colorado Supreme Court and to former Chief Judge Janice B. Davidson of the Colorado Court of Appeals. The Institute also honored outstanding performance at the District Judge, County Judge and Magistrate level with its traditional Judicial Excellence Awards. Those awards went to Chief Judge James F. Hartman, Jr., of the 19th Judicial District, Adams County Court Judge Leroy D. Kirby and Magistrate Emily Anderson of the 17th Judicial District.

The awards dinner was keynoted by Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper, who plays a key role in maintaining the merit system of judicial selection adopted by Colorado voters in 1966 by filling judicial vacancies from a list of three nominees screened by non-partisan selection panels. CJI is a non-profit citizens group founded in 1979 which works to maintain that merit selection system while improving the quality and accountability of Colorado’s judiciary.

Besides recognizing judicial excellence, the annual dinner helps raise funds to foster that very excellence. Since CJI created its Judicial Education Fund in 2002, it has raised more than \$280,000 to support continuing education for judges, magistrates and full-time judicial

department employees. Such grants have become even more important in recent years as the state's fiscal crisis has forced cutbacks in the court system's budget even while caseloads continued to grow.

CJI Chair K.C. Groves told the audience the Institute was able to increase scholarships by 72 percent last year. CJI leverages those scholarships by partnering with the National Judicial College in Reno, Nev., which matches CJI's scholarship funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis. Thus, the \$95,000 CJI has contributed to NJC has provided \$190,000 in judicial education for Colorado's judges and other key court employees.

Gov. Hickenlooper told the awards audience that Colorado's Judicial Merit Selection System supports his efforts at economic development by assuring business leaders of fair and competent courts.

Each of the five honored jurists was introduced with a video presentation, then gave short remarks. Chief Justice Bender, who will leave the state high court in January after reaching the mandatory retirement age of 72, was obviously moved by the award and expressed gratitude to CJI for its efforts supporting judicial excellence.

"I think Colorado has been blessed by the quality of our courts and legal community," the Chief Justice said.

Bender was honored in part for successfully managing the state's 3,600 court and probation employees during a budget crisis and opening the \$258 million Ralph L. Carr Colorado Judicial Center two months earlier than anticipated. He was also honored for "his enthusiasm to enhance the public's experience with Colorado's judicial system [as] evidenced by the branch's initiative to create self-help centers in every judicial district and a major drive led by

the Colorado Supreme Court and the Colorado Access to Justice Commission to find additional revenue to fund Colorado legal services.”

Chief Judge Davidson recently retired after serving on the Colorado Court of Appeals for 25 years, ten of them as chief judge. She was first named to the bench as a Denver county court judge in 1985.

A former Court of Appeals colleague, Judge Steve Briggs, said Davidson “can best be described as a law of physics. If there is an immovable object in the universe, it is because it has never crossed the path of Janice Davidson.”

Unlike the Colorado Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals is required to hear all appeals, which generates a very high workload of some 2,000 cases a year. The Supreme Court upholds the Court of Appeals in about 93 percent of the cases it selects for further review, Briggs said.

Judge Davidson was also deeply moved by the award and thanked CJI for its efforts promoting excellence and impartiality in the courts.

“Without an enlightened and independent judiciary,” the rule of law will collapse,” she said.

Magistrate Anderson provided one of the most emotional moments of the evening as she described being accosted by a young woman who announced: “I’m Ashley. Do you remember me? You sent me to jail.”

The magistrate remembered having to remove Ashley from her family and send her to jail. She braced for a scene but the young woman then exclaimed: “You saved my life! I’m clean and sober and I’m going to go to college.”

Anderson, who has served as a magistrate in the Seventeenth Judicial District since 2005, concluded that, “I always wanted to have a job where I could change people’s lives.”

Judge Kirby was honored for both his work a judge and as an intelligence officer in the Naval Reserves. He was appointed to the Adams County Court bench in 2009 and helped create a drug court in 2010. He said the Navy helps instill values such as honor, courage and commitment and that he tries to follow those same values in the law.

Chief Judge Hartmann has served in the 19th Judicial District since being named a district court judge in 2002. In 2009, Chief Justice Mullarkey appointed Hartmann as the Water Judge for Division One Water Court in April, 2009 and as Chief Judge in July, 2009. Before going to law school at the University of Idaho, he studied biology and chemistry at the University of Northern Colorado. He said that scientific background helped him cope with the often complex issues involved in water law.

Together, this year's five honorees exemplify the standards of excellence, fairness and public service that Colorado voters have learned to expect since they abandoned the former partisan judicial elections in favor of the current merit selection system in 1966.

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