

Love of the Law

Based on an interview of Judge Peter W. Stekete by Alissa N. Hudson in November 2015

Judge Peter W. Stekete was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and though his family moved to the Washington, DC area shortly after his birth, he has always felt a connection to the mid-west, and returns to visit family there often. He attended Hope College in Michigan, graduating with a degree in history, and his love of history and politics lead him to pursue a career in the law. He attended law school at Indiana University in Bloomington, graduating in 1968. He met his wife, Sheila, while in law school, and they were married in the chapel at Indiana University.

Following law school graduation, Stekete took the Indiana Bar and began looking for work. Though there were several local opportunities, he eventually took a position with State Farm as a claims adjuster, (it paid more and included a company car, which, “to a kid just out of school sounded close to Nirvana!) This brought him back to the Northern Virginia area. He agreed to work for State Farm for three years, knowing he eventually wanted to go into private practice. He recalls that upon passing the Virginia Bar, his character and fitness interview was conducted by W. Hill Brown, Selwyn Smith and Lacey Compton, Sr. (Brown and Compton are two of the PWC Bar Association’s founding fathers.) “Those were the senior members of the Bar and you would always look up to them.” Stekete began working with Manny Velasquez, whom he had met through State Farm. After a while with Velasquez, he affiliated with Jim Davenport and Turner Smith and a young associate named Bill Henderson.

While at Smith and Davenport, as the law firm would eventually become known, Stekete refers to himself as being a general practitioner, although “much of the practice that the firm had was municipal work, and that was largely because of Turner Smith. Jim Davenport had done a lot of real estate work, and that was really his forte.” There is no question that both Smith and Davenport were his mentors. Stekete referred to Turner Smith as a Virginia Gentleman, going on to say, “he would look at you, and if there was some disappointment or if it was some encouragement that he wanted to give”, he would say it with his eyes. “His manner was the commanding element of the environment when he was present, and he knew the law. He knew municipal law in ways that I think few others did.” Stekete spoke of both Smith and Davenport as being patient and giving “me running room, which I found beneficial in a number of ways. There was a certain element of trust”, and that “buoyed my confidence as well.” Stekete also considers Bill Henderson to have been a mentor, musing that they would spend a great deal of “time together going over things and talking about things.”

When asked what changes in the practice of law he has seen, Stekete recalled the dissolution of fee schedules, the beginning of lawyer advertising, a greater dependence on support staff, and the advent of touch tone phones, correcting typewriters and eventually, office computers. “The way the practice of law has evolved is monumental.”

Stekete’s affiliation with Davenport would also connect him politically, which had been an interest of his all his life, fueled at an early age by his mother’s affiliation with the League of Women Voters in the 1950s. Stekete recalls running election campaigns while in high school, working to register voters while in college, driving the sound truck and working the polls for the 1960 presidential election, and enjoying the “strong sense of community”, that came from working behind the scenes in this manner. Through his involvement with local politics he witnessed the impact of quiet visionaries like Harry Parrish and Edgar Rohr who “had a hand in the city’s growth and development in a very quiet, unassuming way that made a world of difference for this community”. Stekete would eventually become chairman of the consolidated Republican Party, (representing PWC and the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park), knowing that such activity would preclude him from receiving a judicial appointment. But upon the retirement of Judge Joseph A. Gallagher, Judge Stekete accepted an appointment to the General District Court Bench in 1999. He had been in practice about 30 years at that time.

Judge Stekete views his appointment to the bench as another opportunity to share his “love for this law, this cement that keeps us all together...in a meaningful way.” Having been a general practitioner, he felt well suited to General District Court. He enjoyed taking the opportunity to talk about the law, to explain it from the bench, and felt it was his responsibility to do so for the benefit of those who “rarely ever see the inside of a courthouse.” A love of the law and the many ways it impacts society is the underlying theme that connects the chapters in Stekete’s life. It is clear he has felt blessed every step of the way.

Judge Stekete retired from the General District Court Bench in 2014. He enjoys visiting with his children and grandchildren, photography and baseball, among other interests.