

THE VILLAGE REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Judicial Candidate Survey

Ralph L, Wolf

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1) I have spent my entire legal career serving the New York State court system. My journey in New York State courts began in law school when Dean John Feerick asked me to be a research assistant to the Commission to Promote Public Confidence in Judicial Elections. This opportunity gave me a deep appreciation for the ethical imperative of judicial service and exposed me to the complexities of effectuating justice, particularly in the New York State court system.

Upon graduating from law school in 2006, I joined the Unified Court System Legal Fellows Program, where I spent a year gaining experience supporting judges both in a courtroom and at the New York State Judicial Institute. My first assignment in the Legal Fellows Program was to work for Honorable Robert Jones, then Supervising Judge of Supreme Court, Civil, Kings County. Thereafter, in Kings County Supreme Court, I worked for Justice Joseph Levine in a Medical Malpractice Part where I drafted memorandum of law and decisions, conferenced cases and oversaw jury selection. Midway through the Fellowship, I was asked to go to the Judicial Institute to work on a curriculum for the Town and Village Court judicial trainings as described in the 2006 Action Plan for the Justice Courts. I traveled throughout the state to each Judicial District to assist with trainings of the Town and Village justices.

At the conclusion of the Fellowship in 2007, I became counsel to the late Honorable Robert G.M. Keating, Dean of the Judicial Institute. In this role, I provided substantive training to judges in the areas of housing, problem solving courts and ethics. Additionally, I developed the first cyber-security and foreclosure curricula for the annual judicial seminars. Judge Keating was a great mentor with deep knowledge of all facets of the Unified Court System. Under Judge Keating's guidance, I learned to frame issues in need of solutions.

In 2009, I was asked to become a Court Attorney to rotating non-Family Court judges in the New York City Family Court Weekend Arraignment Part at 100 Centre Street. This assignment marked the beginning of my deep interest in the Family Law and the New York City and State Family Courts. For over two years, on weekends and holidays, I assisted non-Family Court judges at weekend arraignments as they confronted unfamiliar juvenile pre-petition hearings, counseling them on legal matters, typical courtroom practices, and negotiations with counsel.

At the same time, I came to serve judges in Bronx County Family Court (where I also started and managed the Volunteer Attorney Program), Kings County Family Court, and New York County Family Court. I worked alongside Bronx County Supervising Judge Monica

Drinane and now Supervising Judge Sarah Cooper, Kings County Supervising Judge Amanda White, and New York County Supervising Judge Douglas Hoffman. In these capacities, I conferenced cases, drafted bench memos and wrote draft decisions for judges, managed court calendars, and served on various committees including the New York City Family Court Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender and Queer Committee and the Kings County Family Court Strategic Planning Committee.

When working in the Family Court, I learned how the court process itself can be traumatic for litigants (including children), and how a skilled jurist can assuage that experience for families. I saw firsthand how losing one's driver's license in a support violation case can lead to diminished opportunities to gain employment and strained relationships with children and other family members. I saw the result of terminations of parental rights, sometimes relief and sometimes pain and sometimes both. Perhaps the brightest example of the joy and impact of Family Court can be witnessed by attending an Adoption Day. This yearly event in each county's Family Court, which I helped plan and deliver in several boroughs and most recently under the care of Kings County Family Court Judge Judith Waksberg, celebrates the joy of permanency in a child's life. Despite the trauma pervasive in the families served by Family Court and its impact on those serving in Family Court, I gained a great deal of experience with tools I know would be of value as a judge.

In 2018, I was offered an incredible opportunity to join the office of the Honorable Sherry Klein Heitler, New York County Supreme Court Justice and Chief of the New York State Office of Policy and Planning (OPP). OPP provides technical assistance to the over 300 New York State Problem Solving Courts, including Adult Drug, Opioid, Human Trafficking, Veteran, Driving While Intoxicated, Mental Health, Integrated Domestic Violence and Family Treatment Courts (FTCs). As a member of the Office of Policy and Planning team, I have the opportunity to put my Family Court experience in service of furthering the incredible work of FTCs throughout the state. FTCs provide a pathway for achieving positive outcomes through interagency collaboration, coordinated and comprehensive support services, effective drug testing, and enhanced accountability. They are unique because they require a multidisciplinary approach for their success in improving outcomes for children and families involved in the Child Welfare System who have Substance Use Disorder issues. I coordinate with court colleagues across the state and interagency partners like the Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services and Office of Children and Family Services. I am able to use my experience with trauma-informed care and solution-focused strategies in a variety of statewide courts.

As a law clerk, I had two responsibilities: the Individual Assignment System (IAS) Part 30 and the Transit Authority Settlement Part (TASP) 40. For the Supreme Court Civil calendar, I managed cases and drafted decisions for the Judge. While most of these matters involved labor law, other issues included insurance law, matrimonial, personal injury, First Amendment, and human rights. Additionally, I also conferenced all of the cases in 40 TASP, Judge Heitler's NYC Transit calendar. All of the 40 TASP cases were either personal injury, motor vehicle or labor law. I learned how to manage conferences towards expeditiously settling cases or moving them

to trial in IAS Part 30 and I listened, asked questions and either settled the cases or quickly sent them to trial.

My 16 years in the New York State court system have been a complete immersion in the complexities of adjudicating disputes and setting up processes by which those disputes can be fairly and effectively managed. With my background in the court system, it seems logical that I now aspire to serve the public as a judge. While less obvious, this is also an extension of my life as an artist. In early September 2001, with an MFA in Painting, a studio in NYC and a recently opened solo gallery exhibition, my life was profoundly altered by the events of Sept. 11, 2001 when the husband and father of the family-owned gallery presenting my work was on the plane that struck the North Tower. As this great tragedy unfolded for family, friends, the nation and me, it prompted my own soul searching and my decision to leave art and pursue the law. Working as a judge would be a culmination of this transition from creating paintings to building a more just society, one case at a time.

2) Our state's two systems of justice were apparent to me when I transitioned from working in the New York City Family Court to the New York State Supreme Court. While the changes to the Uniform Civil Rules for the Supreme Court and the County Court that became effective February 1 2021, may have been helpful, they exacerbated this divide. Where several of the changes may have improved efficiency in the Commercial Division and other courts where court and client resources are plentiful, the requirements are onerous in high volume, lesser resourced courts like Family, Housing and Civil. For example, while responsible case conferencing is a priority, jurists need to have discretion to effectuate this goal.

3)

a) There are times when discretion must be exercised in order to achieve a just and fair outcome. Within the parameters of the law, I would use discretion to act in the interest of justice to achieve an outcome which would otherwise not happen.

b) Frivolous conduct undermines the efficiency and authority of the court system. I would let parties know that frivolous conduct will not be condoned. Once warned, I would sanction parties if necessary.

c) Technical defects may be commonplace, especially where *pro se* litigants are involved. Of course, I would correct technical defects.

4) Adjournments are often necessary and I would grant reasonable requests for adjournments. If counsel repeatedly asked for adjournments and there is a strong objection, I would grant the adjournment with the directive that the matter would proceed on a certain date. This would include the instruction that if counsel requesting adjournment is unavailable on that day, replacement counsel for that appearance would be required.