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LOCAL news

**JUDICIAL
SNAPSHOT**

Continued from the cover

Be fair, be just, be merciful."

These are the three vows Wilson took along with her oath of office to the Multnomah County District Court in 1991, as one of former Gov. Barbara Roberts' judicial appointments.

In 1994, Wilson, who received her bachelor's degree from Willamette University in Salem and her law degree from the Willamette University School of Law, became a Multnomah County Circuit Court judge. She hopes someday to be a federal judge.

"Law is a calling," she tells *Just Out*.

"Serving society and the rule of the law" matters to the native Oregonian, and one doesn't doubt it after chatting with her and her associates in the legal field, and watching her work it from the bench.

Still, for Wilson there is no clash between the expression of compassion and upholding the law.

For example, in late January she eased the probation terms of a woman who was convicted of drug dealing in February 1998 for running a facility that provided medicinal marijuana to people with cancer, AIDS and other illnesses.

Wilson told the woman: "You break [the] law at your own risk until the law does change." But she nonetheless relaxed the probation restrictions enough for the perpetrator to gush: "Oh, this is wonderful, wonderful news."

In other words, Wilson considers context, and acts accordingly.

Wilson was born in 1954 in Medford, and moved to the Portland area a few years later.

"My parents weren't involved in politics, they were involved with the church," she says, adding a sense of civic mindfulness was instilled early on.

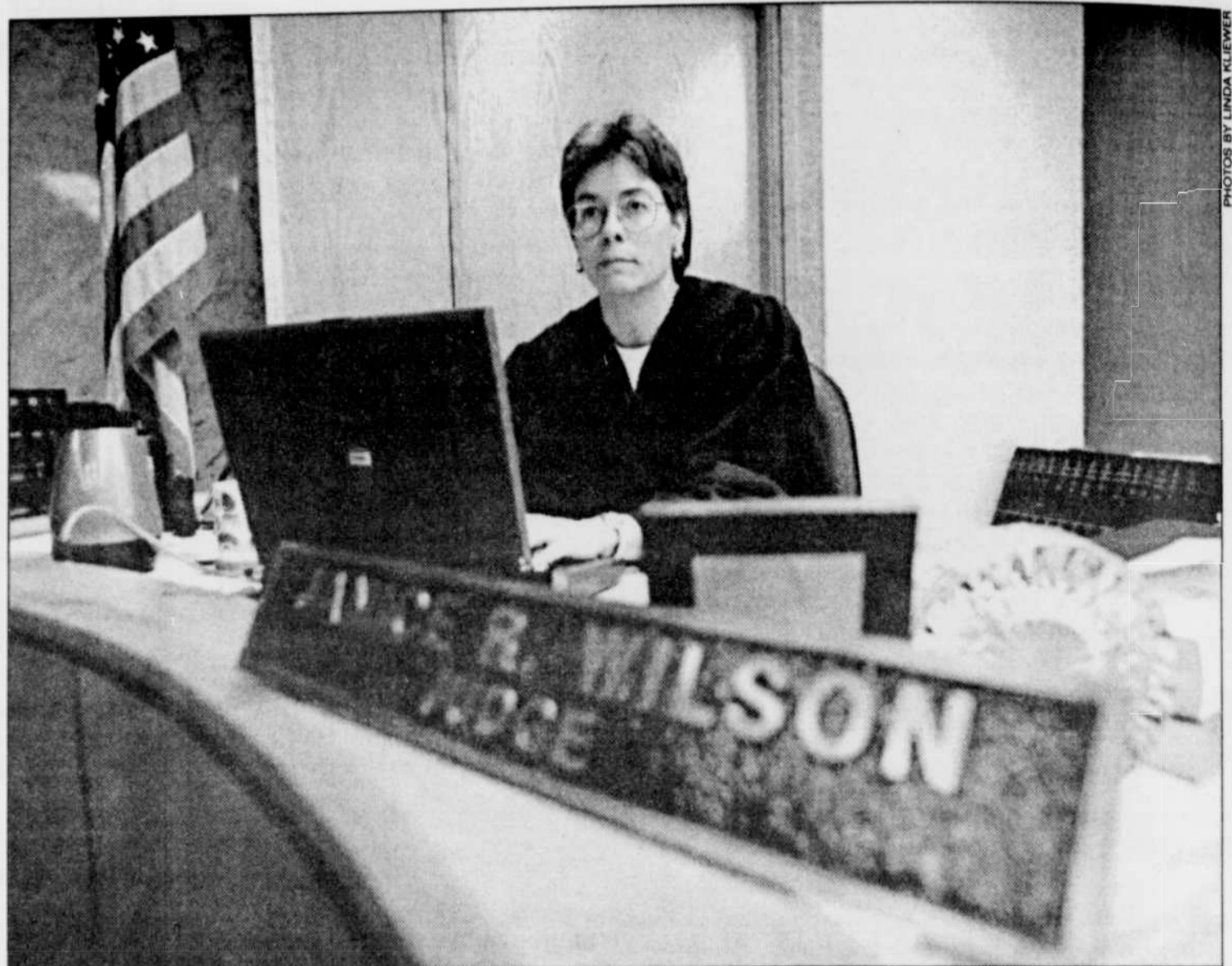
Her dad snagged the "8 Gallon Pin" when he hit the eight-gallon mark in personal blood donations, and he nurtured a young Janice's intellectual curiosity.

"If I had a question, he wouldn't just say, 'Let's go look it up.' It would be, 'This is going to be a lot of fun.' He really had an enormous enthusiasm and joy about learning," she recalls.

And it spread to his offspring. While some attorneys gripe over tedious rules and regs, Wilson embraces the profession's intricacies. And she finds the tales of the broken and anxious people who came to her when she was a private practice lawyer—and now land before her as a judge—to be a compelling, not torturous, exercise.

Throughout, she keeps it objective and remains hopeful about humankind: "I will never say a particular person is incapable of change."

Maybe you think a judge's life is glamorous. Step into the Multnomah County Courthouse and you might reconsider. The air is thick and funky; the lighting a throwback to your elementary school days.



Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Janice Wilson

And you'd better leave your guns, knives, cannons and slingshots at home—or else.

Each weekday, perhaps after a morning workout at a nearby athletic club, Wilson makes her way to this destination. Her office and chambers nuzzle side by side.

From the morning into the afternoon, she'll consider probation violation, rape, sexual assault, drug and other cases. The seedier manifestations of life.

The worst, Wilson says, are the child abuse cases.

"The things people do to their children..."

In March, Wilson received the Judge Mercedes Deiz award from Oregon Women Lawyers. The annual award was established to recognize lawyers who have made outstanding contributions to the promotion of women and minorities in the legal profession.

It no doubt tasted delicious to Wilson, who in becoming a judge had to forgo much in the way of civil rights activism.

When she joined the district court, for example, it was at the height of the volatile campaign over Measure 9, which sought to constitutionally classify homosexuality as abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse. Queers and their allies were taking to the streets, speaking out daily at forums, and mixing it up in unprecedented numbers in Oregon. It had to be tough for Wilson. Her sacrifice, however, has not gone unnoticed.

In making the case as to why Wilson was deserving of the Mercedes Deiz award, a supporter wrote: "Judge Wilson has shown great personal courage in this work. For example, in response to a question at the 1993 Oregon Judicial Con-

ference [during a session on] diversity issues in the courts, Judge Wilson noted to 200 judges in the room that she was the first openly lesbian judge in Oregon, how the Code of Judicial Conduct prevented her from taking any leadership role on opposing Measure 9 in 1992, 'the biggest political issue of [her] life,' and how the gay and lesbian community thought she had turned her back on them once she assumed the bench. Most judges in the room had not known that.

"When later I overheard several comments expressing surprise about Judge Wilson's sexual orientation and implying it was incongruous with their established admiration for her legal and judicial skills, I knew I had witnessed a powerful and transformative event. Judge Wilson opened some minds that day."

The writer added: "I expect Judge Wilson opens some minds most days. Each day as she takes the bench, she restores her courage and renews three vows she took along with her oath of office, vows memorialized in a plaque on her bench that says: 'Be fair, be just, be merciful.' She is, and I am mindful of her lessons each day in my work."

Now, if only we could nail down the *Judge Janice* show.



Judge Wilson exiting her chambers

PHOTOS BY LINDA KLEIVER