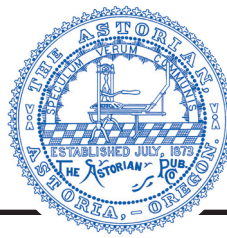


OPINION



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OUR VIEW

Judicial pick deserves intense public interest

To be a Circuit Court judge in a rural county like ours is to become deeply woven into the fabric of society. “The bench,” as judgeships are known in legal circles, is far more than a front-row seat for human foibles. The right person can be a genuine force for good.

Paula Brownhill is such a person. As she transitions into semiretirement in November after 25 years on the local bench, we can be thankful for having the benefit of her good sense. Her peers recognize her qualities. She received this year’s Oregon State Bar’s Wallace P. Carson Jr. Award for Judicial Excellence, which honors her for making significant contributions to the judicial system and as “a model of professionalism, integrity and judicial independence.”

Most of us go through life without ever having a personal interaction with a Circuit Court judge. Typical residents aren’t charged with felonies. Most of us don’t get sued, or sue anybody else. More may connect with the court for things like probate to transfer property after a loved one dies, or for other court functions like adoptions, contested divorces and child custody. But even in these instances, it’s somewhat unusual to have anything beyond a passing question-and-answer session with a judge.

This lack of familiarity leaves ordinary folks to assume what we see on TV is what a judge’s career looks like. It isn’t. Real judges squirm with embarrassed irritation when they see how television judges get away with behavior barred by law and rules of professional conduct. But by the same token, real-life judges all must be wildly envious of the galloping pace of fictional jurisprudence. While straightforward criminal cases can be wrapped up within a few weeks, civil lawsuits drag on for years. And almost any legal case of whatever kind produces piles of paperwork and seemingly endless procedural steps.

Besides having to interpret — and comply with — state statutes, past decisions, court rules and professional standards, trial court judges



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Gov. Kate Brown will appoint a new Circuit Court judge for Clatsop County.

like Brownhill are always subject to having their rulings appealed for review by higher courts, including the Oregon Supreme Court. In Oregon, judges also must face voters every six years in order to keep their jobs — though, in practicality, once on the bench it takes a fairly major blunder to get involuntarily thrown off.

Despite the huge workload and many complications of being a Circuit Court judge, it is a much sought-after job. Many lawyers aspire to it — for the prestige, guaranteed income, sense of professional

achievement, and belief in a judge’s power to achieve positive outcomes for communities and individuals.

WE ALL SHOULD STRONGLY ENCOURAGE THE GOVERNOR TO NAME A REPLACEMENT WITH AMPLE TIME ARGUING CASES, A DEMONSTRATED CONNECTION TO OUR COUNTY, IMPECCABLE ETHICS AND A REPUTATION FOR LEGAL ACUMEN.

Lawyerly interest in the job is influenced by the fact that Oregon’s Circuit Court judges are among the lowest paid in the nation. They make \$142,136 a year — nearly three times the median household income in Clatsop County. Equivalent judges in Washington state make \$194,574

this year, increasing to \$204,424 on July 1, 2020. Two bills were introduced in the 2019 Oregon legislative session to raise judicial salaries, but both failed to leave committee before adjournment.

Notwithstanding the pay, these coveted judgeships deserve the utmost public interest and attention. Being a good judge requires a strong work ethic, legal scholarship, strictness combined with human decency, understanding of local conditions and societal challenges, intelligent interpretation of statutes and legal precedents and a thick skin to survive the

very real strains of having to judge other people.

Being a judge can be, and often is, emotionally stressful. Many criminal and family-law cases bring people to court under the worst of circumstances. Civil lawsuits can involve bitter adversaries, with the judge having to act as a kind of impartial referee.

With a population just under

40,000, Clatsop County is fortunate in having three Circuit Court judges, which greatly helps spread the load. Across the Columbia River, by comparison, Pacific and Wahkiakum counties share one judge between about 27,000 residents. The remaining Clatsop County judges, Cindee Matyas and Dawn McIntosh, will be a great help in getting the governor’s appointee up to speed.

On the down side, trial court administrator Lee Merrill is also retiring this fall. Highly experienced administrative staff like Merrill are invaluable, and difficult to replace.

Six attorneys have put their names in for consideration by Gov. Kate Brown for appointment to the position Brownhill is vacating. Whomever she picks will face election next year.

We all should strongly encourage the governor to name a replacement with ample time arguing cases, a demonstrated connection to our county, impeccable ethics and a reputation for legal acumen. Even with two seasoned judges to help smooth the new person’s path, this isn’t a job for a novice. We must keep a close eye on our new judge and be supportive, while also being prepared to encourage opponents to run.

This is our judge, not the governor’s.

GUEST COLUMN

Facing climate crisis, we need real unity

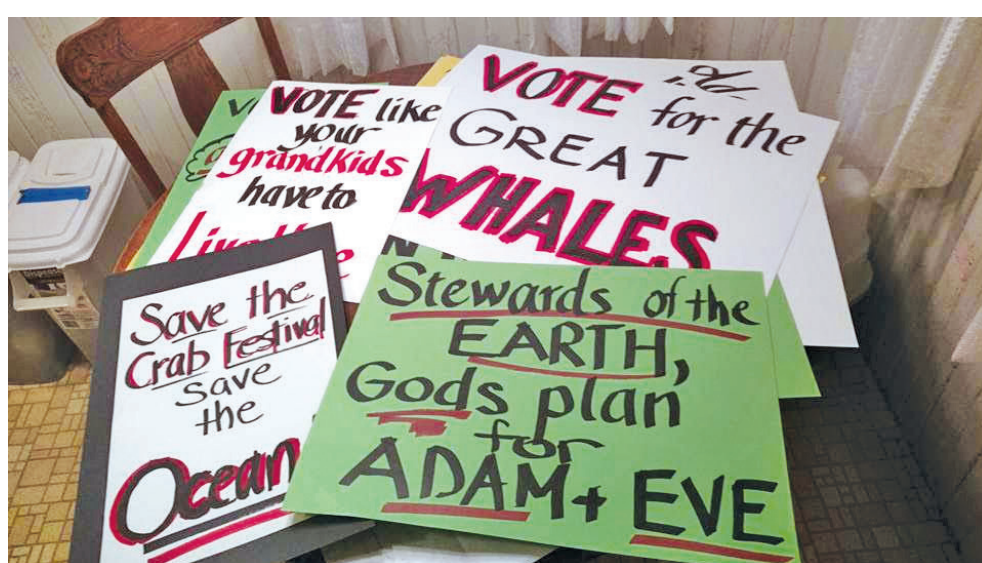
Earlier this year, I spent a few days, all too short, with my mother. At the time, I didn’t know she was dying, or at least I didn’t want to acknowledge it. She was frail, yes, but she was also tough. She’d pull through.

I ignored the signs that now seem obvious. How she shivered uncontrollably even after we turned up the heat. How she refused meals. How she got incredibly short of breath just getting out of bed. It’s hard to watch the demise of a loved one, and so I denied it.

During my lifetime, there have been ample signs that the earth can’t withstand forever the pressures of the industrial age. America’s national bird, the bald eagle, nearly went extinct. Lake Erie — or more precisely, the river that flowed into it — caught fire. Smog shortened life spans. Acid rain corroded buildings.

None of these problems fixed themselves. Our elected officials devised regulations, and we had to adjust. No more spraying DDT on pesky insects, no more flammable sewage, new emissions controls on cars and smokestacks. But everyone benefited from the results — clean air, clean water, safe soils and rivers that don’t burn.

During these same decades, our environment was also straining under a climate crisis caused primarily by too much carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, much of it generated by us humans. Starting decades ago, scientists warned of the consequences. Acidifying waters would hurt fishermen. Ecological disruptions would kill the trees



Our environment is straining under a climate crisis.

on which loggers depend. Droughts would threaten farmers and ranchers. Rising oceans would flood coastal communities.

But unlike burning rivers and smog-ridden air, the climate crisis was hard to see, the problem complex and hard to grasp. After many orchestrated and heavily financed attempts at denial, we now understand the urgency. We know the sorts of actions, personal and legislative, that would help.

Still, it’s easier to tell ourselves it’s someone else’s problem — people in China or India or anywhere but here — when in actuality, the U.S. has for decades led the world in cumulative carbon dioxide emissions. It’s easier to tell ourselves that nothing we do in our own nation or state or community or home will make a difference.

Here in Oregon, certain politicians and wealthy business owners are making cli-

mate change into a wedge issue. They’re spending big bucks — \$120,000 and counting — into trying to divide us in a campaign they’ve ironically tagged as “unity.” In this well-financed them-vs-us effort, they’re spinning lies about proposed legislation. They’re pretending that everything that could be done to address the climate emergency is already being done. They’re pointing fingers and trying to make it seem as if no one cares about hard-working Oregonians except timber and trucking companies.

As a woman who owns my own business, I value every penny I earn. I don’t want the cost of anything to go up — not the cost of shipping or paper or gas. Anyone who knows me would laugh at the idea that I live high on the hog.

But facts are facts. We can’t afford to do nothing. Oceans are warming, sea lev-

els rising. Drought is forcing people from their home countries, causing a refugee crisis. Crop pests are thriving. Bark beetles are devastating millions of acres of forest. Corals, shellfish and phytoplankton, the essential base of our ocean’s food chain, are increasingly at risk. Warming temperatures threaten our food supplies, driving up costs.

As elected officials in our communities, our state, and our nation listen to stakeholders and propose solutions, we can be assured there will be no perfect answers. With some will come sacrifice. Ideally, the burden would fall mostly on those who’ve made their fortunes at the expense of our planet, the same big businesses and wealthy CEOs who happily invest hundreds of thousands of dollars to divide us when we most need real unity.

I value hard work and responsibility. I value family and freedom and my rural community. I value nature. For myself and my children and my grandchildren, I refuse to stand by and do nothing while we humans cause irreversible damage to the planet.

We’re not helpless. Nor are we on our own. We have each other. But we must reject the attempts of big-moneyed interests to divide us.

When we lose a loved one, as I lost my mother this year, we’re reminded of how brief a time we have on this earth. Our legacy is in how we take care of those we love and in the changes we’re willing to make to preserve the values we share. We are living through a defining moment. It’s time to put aside ginned-up differences and work toward meaningful solutions.

Deb Vanasse is a volunteer with the leadership team of Indivisible North Coast Oregon. She lives in Warrenton.



DEB VANASSE