
*Ave Atque Vale:
Fritz Ohlrich Retires as Clerk/Administrator of the Court*



Attorneys scheduled to present oral argument to the Court greatly appreciated the informal “tutorials” that Fritz provided in the courtroom before the justices entered. The avuncular Ohlrich enjoyed this part of the job as well: “I tried to put them at their ease,” he recalls, “I wanted them to be relaxed and be able to make their best argument.”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CALIFORNIA ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS

Frederick (“Fritz”) Ohlrich retired as Clerk/Administrator of the California Supreme Court in June 2012. Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye offered high praise: “Fritz Ohlrich has served as an esteemed and distinguished Clerk/Administrator of the Supreme Court for the past 12 years and has been an invaluable advisor and friend to me during my tenure as Chief Justice.” Former Chief Justice Ronald M. George concurred, observing that “his exceptional demeanor truly made it a pleasure for justices and staff to work with him, as it was for the attorneys who received his helpful briefings before making their oral arguments before the Court.”

The Clerk/Administrator is the Court’s chief executive officer and is responsible for planning, organizing, and directing the management of the Office of the Clerk and all non-judicial administrative support activities for the Court. Fritz himself summarizes the matter in

these terms: “In my view the primary job of the Clerk is to make certain the Supreme Court and its entire staff have the resources necessary so the Court can perform its function in a timely, efficient, and accurate manner, thus ensuring the highest level of public confidence in the institution.” This entails broad programmatic responsibility for budget, personnel, and purchasing decisions. It also requires the Clerk/Administrator to serve as the Court’s liaison with the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Reporter of Decisions, the California Highway Patrol (which provides security), and the State employees in charge of operations and maintenance of the Ronald M. George State Office Complex in San Francisco and the courtrooms that the Court routinely uses in Los Angeles and Sacramento.

But it also requires close attention to seemingly mundane details. Fritz was invited to apply for the Clerk/

Administrator position by Chief Justice George in late 1999, while he was the administrator of the Los Angeles Municipal Court. He recalls sitting in on oral argument when the Court was next in Los Angeles, in order to get a sense of the justices as individuals. There was an elec-



Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye offers high praise to Fritz Ohlrich at his retirement party.

tric light in the ceiling of the auditorium that kept flickering during the arguments. Later, when Fritz was being interviewed for the position, one of the justices asked: “Mr. Ohlrich, what would you do if you were given the job of Clerk of the Court?” Fritz replied “Well, the first thing I’d do is fix that darn light bulb!” He was offered the job.

Deciding whether or not to accept the offer was not difficult. Leaving the trial court for the court of last resort was “a most invigorating and challenging career opportunity.” In addition, the move to San Francisco allowed him to trade his one-and-one-half hour commute for a 15 minute trip from a townhouse in the City. And there was the reality of the L.A. Municipal Court’s imminent disappearance — as a consequence of trial court unification. As one of the Municipal Court judges said of Fritz’s departure, “My, what an elegant lifeboat you’ve chosen.” Fritz began service as the 25th Clerk of the Court in January 2000.

Asked about significant changes in how the Office of the Clerk operated during his management, Fritz pointed first to implementation of “Case Information” technology that provides online case docket information for all pending cases, updated hourly. Additionally, the system allows users to register for automatic notifications of all important case actions. “This single improvement meant that law firms and litigants did not have to call the Court on Wednesday afternoon to determine whether review had been granted or denied during the morning petition conference. This eliminated hundreds of weekly telephone inquiries and was perhaps the most important step in streamlining the Clerk’s operation and improving the service the Court provides. In the *Marriage Cases* and the Prop 8 Case, tens of thousands of individuals were registered for, and received, automated Case Information notifications.” (Fritz encourages CSCHS members

not familiar with this service to register at: <http://appellatecases.courtinfo.ca.gov/email.cfm?dist=0>)

The *Marriage Cases*, the Prop 8 Cases and other high-profile cases presented the Court with unique logistic challenges. One of Fritz’s most satisfying accomplishments is the contribution the Clerk’s Office made to the Court’s response to the demands of those cases. Fritz observes: “The Court provided unprecedented access to the public while handling these high-profile cases without distraction. In addition to the case dockets being available online (and automatic notice of Court actions being provided instantaneously to many thousands), the Court posted the briefs and televised the oral arguments. And once the Court filed its decisions, the Reporter of Decisions immediately posted the opinions online.”

The greatest challenges Fritz faced were directly related to continually diminishing fiscal resources. Fritz points out that the Court’s funding has been reduced each of the past three years and that in the two preceding years it was static, despite rising costs. For more than three consecutive years the entire Court staff (attorneys and clerk’s office personnel) have endured a “temporary” salary reduction of 4.6 percent. In addition, in 2010 the clerk’s office in Los Angeles was closed, three deputy clerks laid off, and their work transferred to San Francisco, to be handled by existing staff. Fritz was clear: “Making certain the Court’s work continued to be timely and accurately processed in this fiscal environment was the most significant challenge I faced.”

His biggest frustration? “The lack of sufficient financial and staff resources to implement electronic filing and related technological improvements now standard practice in the federal courts.”

With his retirement in June, Fritz concludes a distinguished career in law enforcement (nine years as a Deputy Sheriff of Ventura County) and court administration. It has been a career during which he earned a Masters degree in judicial administration from California Lutheran University, became a graduate fellow of the National Center for State Courts, and served two terms as an advisory member of the Judicial Council of California. And he has been an energetic, personable, and effective member of the California Supreme Court Historical Society board of directors for many years.

In a 2010 article about Fritz the *Los Angeles Times* called him the “Supreme Court’s historian, the keeper of its records, and its biggest fan.” Fritz will no doubt enjoy the opportunities provided by his retirement to travel with Mary Holland, his companion for the past nine years, and to spend time with his three young grandchildren: Aiden (four); Madelyn (three); and Sebastian (not quite one). But he will always be the Court’s “biggest fan.” ★