Fish stays close to home

Lee County circuit judge, a Dixon native, draws on experience as local prosecutor

BY MARC KARLINSKY
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Attorneys in Dixon — a town with a population just under 16,000 — take pride in the versatility required to practice law in rural northwestern Illinois. Within its legal community, locals say that their work often entails a wider array of practice areas than one can typically find among the more topic-specific lawyers in and around Chicago.

For 15th Judicial Circuit Judge Daniel A. Fish, having a breadth of experiences during his career as a lawyer now comes in handy while handling cases in Lee County.

“Out here, we’re a small rural area, and you don’t have areas of specialization very frequently, so you do a number of areas,” Fish said. “It’s just like being a judge.”

Following stints as a prosecutor and in private practice, Fish won a 2008 Republican primary race to fill the 15th Circuit seat vacated by former Judge John Payne. Without a Democratic opponent to face in the November election, the Illinois Supreme Court appointed Fish to the bench in July 2008 ahead of his elected term.

The 15th Circuit covers Carroll, Jo Daviess, Lee, Ogle and Stephenson counties in the far northwest corner of the state along the Mississippi River and the Wisconsin state line.

Fish, 58, a Dixon native and alumnus of Western Illinois University in Macomb, first got a taste of the judicial system when after college he worked as a juvenile probation officer in Knox County from 1977 to 1978.

From that experience, Fish got his first glimpse of the work prosecutors do, and set a career goal of becoming one.

He graduated from The John Marshall Law School in 1981 and began working as an assistant state’s attorney in Whiteside County. He returned to his hometown in 1984, and by 1988, he won his first election for Lee County state’s attorney.

It was in his new role as prosecutor that Fish met Ronald Jacobson, his eventual law partner and now-fellow 15th Circuit judge.

Fish hired Jacobson as an assistant state’s attorney in 1988, and the two have worked together for all but a few years since, Jacobson said.

Jacobson, now the presiding judge in Lee County, credits Fish with bringing him to Dixon.

“I grew up in Rockford, and he offered me the job here,” Jacobson said. “And I haven’t left since.”

Fish wasn’t able to get slowly acclimated to his new elected office — he walked into the position during a major case, Jacobson said.

“Right out of the box, there was a murder that occurred,” he said. “His term came in furiously.”

Among his more memorable cases as a prosecutor, Fish recalled a murder trial where he brought a police officer to the witness stand to identify the man he arrested.

During questioning, Fish said he asked the officer to point to the man, who was sitting at the front of the courtroom.

But the arrested man had changed his appearance between the arrest and the trial, Fish said, and the officer replied that the man he arrested wasn’t in the courtroom.

“You’d fall out of your chair when he said, ‘He’s not there,’ ” Fish said.

After 12 years as state’s attorney, Fish opened a new law firm with Jacobson in 2000 — aptly named Fish & Jacobson — across the street from the courthouse.

During their few years in private practice, Fish and Jacobson handled both civil litigation and criminal defense cases. Jacobson said that throughout the years in their varying roles, he most appreciated Fish when the two could play devil’s advocate to each other.

“That was one of the most positive points of my professional relationship with Dan,” Jacobson said.

Robert J. Thompson, a sole practitioner and the Lee County public defender, said that Fish is regarded for his preparedness.

Thompson worked for Fish in the state’s attorney’s office 21 years ago as a Rule 711 licensee while in law school — his first legal job. He said he’s always been impressed with the planning that goes into Fish’s work.

“When he would get a case ready to prosecute, he’d get an outline ready,” Thompson said. “He was good in leading the way in how to be organized. His organization isn’t duplicated in many places.”

Thompson said he regularly defends clients in juvenile and criminal cases in front of Fish. As one of just four judges in the courthouse, Fish is always ready to serve in whatever capacity is needed, Thompson said.

In a small town such as Dixon, the close-knit group of lawyers and attorneys have a good familiarity with one another, Thompson said.

“I’ve practiced in larger counties and in Chicago, and there’s a sense of warmth in the personalities we deal with here,” Thompson said.

That’s just part of the job for Fish and for the other judges of the circuit, Jacobson said.

“He takes a lot of time making sure he’s doing the right thing,” he said.

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