

Highest honor

Long-time Probate Judge and West Hartford resident receives same award his father garnered 30 years earlier

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Staff Writer

Judge Paul J. Knierim, who served as Connecticut's probate court administrator for 11 years, has been recognized for his accomplishments with the Treat Award for Excellence from the National College of Probate Judges, the organization's highest honor.

He was nominated by his colleague Judge Dianne Yamin of the Danbury Probate Court, whose letter included recommendations from such respected jurists and dignitaries as former Gov. M. Jodi Rell, former Chief Justice Chase Rogers, former Supreme Court Justice Andrew McDonald, and former NCPJ president Joseph Egan, among others.

The Judge William W. Treat Award for Excellence, named after the founder of NCPJ, recognizes an individual who has made a significant contribution to the improvement of judicial administration in probate or related fields, according to the state's Office of the Probate Court Administrator.

In her nominating letter Judge Yamin refers to Judge Knierim's "massive court reform in his first year in office" and "his consensus building approach with legislators, judges and municipal leaders."

She added, "I have been attending NCPJ conferences for 30 years where the award had been given to honor someone who has made improvements, and he has made more improvements than

any other person in history. Judge Knierim has also been supportive of the organization and encourages judges to attend the conferences."

She has served as probate judge in Danbury for 30 years, starting out as the youngest judge ever elected at age 29. Knierim was Simsbury's probate judge at that time, and they worked together in meetings on administrative issues of big and small courts.

His father, Judge Glenn E. Knierim, received the same national recognition 30 years earlier in 1989 as the state's probate court administrator. That same year the younger Knierim graduated from Yale Law School, after completing his undergraduate degree at Williams College.

"I tried to emulate my father's compassion and his proficiency. He said probate is a homely court but

"Probate judges are the only judges in Connecticut that are elected. All others are appointed."

-Judge Paul J. Knierim

an opportunity to help someone. It was not about being a judge or the power. He liked the hands-on role with families and individuals. Dad ran for probate judge in Simsbury in 1966. He lived it and loved it and talked about it. If I am [like him], that makes me very happy. The big difference is my father was awarded a silver platter, and I have a clear trophy from



Paul J. Knierim being sworn in by his father Glenn E. Knierim in 1999.

NCPJ," said Knierim, chuckling.

Paul Knierim had direct experience in the state legislature by representing Simsbury in the 16th assembly district. Knierim ran for state representative in the fall of 1990 and served from January 1991 through January 1997. Since probate judge is an elective office, this period taught him what was required to win a seat.

"Probate judges are the only judges in Connecticut that are elected. All others are appointed. My theory is that it's so much a community service function that a local election promotes responsiveness. What sets us apart is that we are not at all partisan. There are 54 judges in Connecticut from both parties, but you would never know what affiliation they are in court," said Knierim.

At the same time, he was working with the law firm of Drew, Mersereau in Avon, and in 1999 he was elected as probate judge for the Simsbury district, where he served for 12 years. Each term is for four years. The district included the towns of Canton, Simsbury, Avon and Granby. In 2009 the probate court system was consolidated,



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and he presided over the change.

Before the consolidation, there were 133 probate courts across the state, and in small towns they were operating only part-time.

"Consolidation was aimed at professionalism with regular business hours. And there was enough of a docket that staff and judges were proficient in all areas. We also added the requirement that all judges had to be attorneys, which was beneficial as more complex issues came up," he said. A year after consolidation, Knierim took on the additional role of the state's probate court administrator, where, according to Judge Yamin, he was responsible for "expanding continuing education for judges and staff, establishing better review of conservators..., and overhaul(ing) the rules of procedure that govern probate cases."

She added, "He also modernized the...probate court system by introducing IT initiatives...of case

