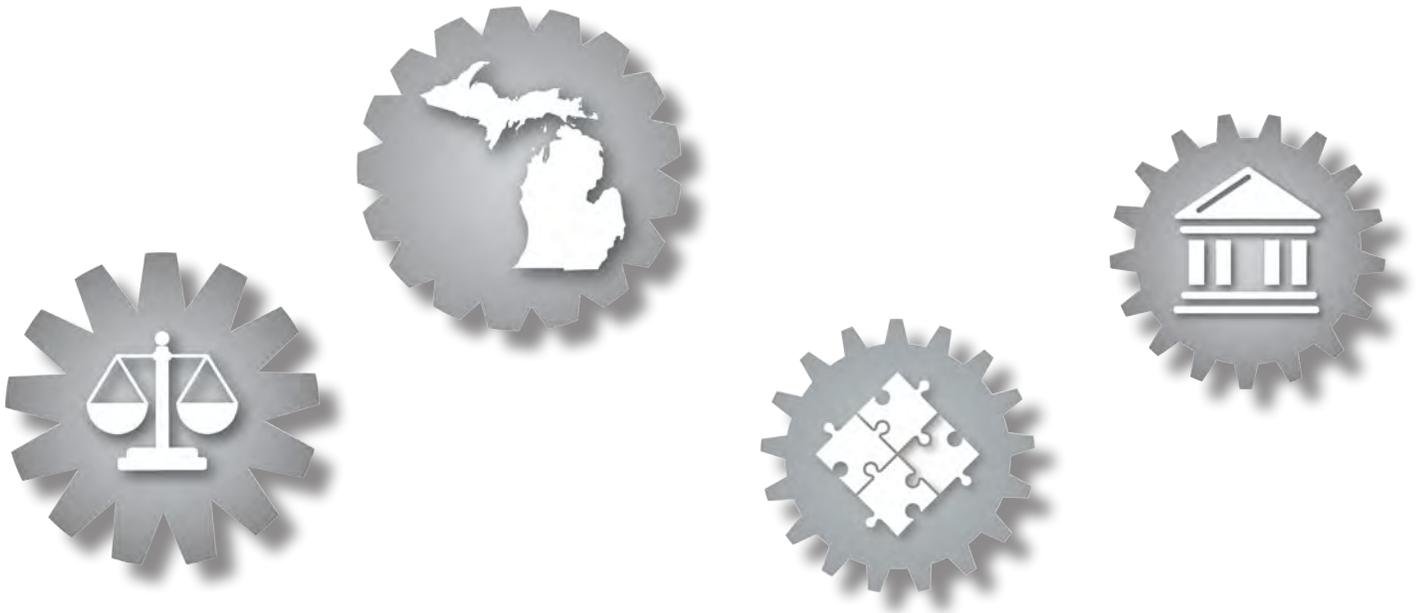


MICHIGAN'S JUDICIARY SUCCESS STORIES



JUDGES IN THE COMMUNITY:
GIVING BACK & MAKING A DIFFERENCE

MESSAGE FROM MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT CHIEF JUSTICE STEPHEN J. MARKMAN

January 2019

When we think of how to evaluate judges, performance measures, time guidelines, or other tangible court tools might well spring to mind. While those are good indicators, they are not the only gauge of an outstanding jurist. Outstanding judges are also likely to do outstanding things in their local communities.

In this edition of Success Stories, we are honored to highlight some of the judges throughout Michigan who make a genuine difference in their communities by giving back. Their passion for volunteer work and commitment to worthy investments of time and resources to better serve the people of Michigan is an inspiration.

As any judge will tell you, volunteering is about giving, contributing, and helping and working with others to make a meaningful contribution to a better community. When judges volunteer, they are often reminded of the impact their professional decisions make on the people who come before them. Everyone has a story, a hardship, a time in their life when they might have required assistance.

The judges featured here represent just a small fraction of the hundreds of district, circuit, and probate judges who give their time to make a difference and set an example for others. Their efforts and commitment send a message that our judiciary is engaged and involved in helping our communities in many different ways to become better places to live, work, and raise a family.

Thank you to each and every judge who donates time and energy to help others. I have no doubt that Michigan's judiciary is second to none in giving back. So as we look ahead to 2019, let us all build upon this record and do even more next year.

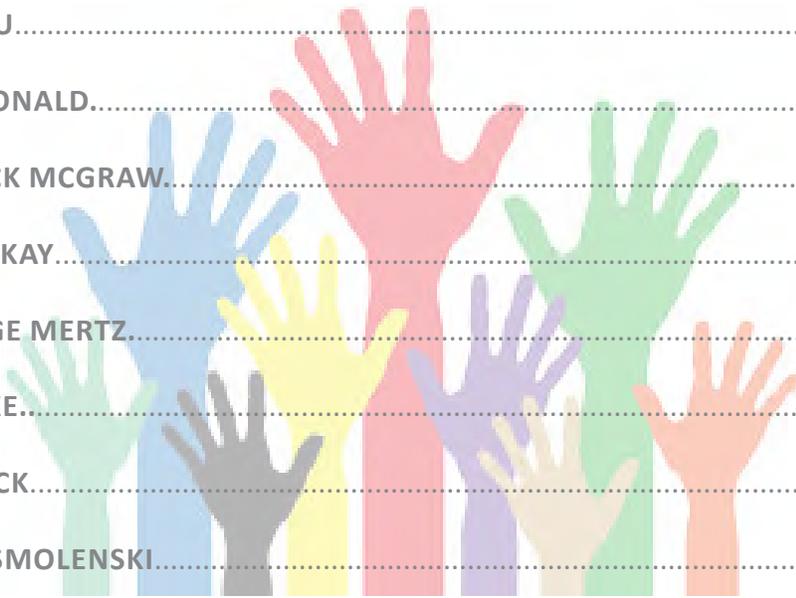


Stephen Markman



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JUDGE DUNCAN BEAGLE: CREATING LEVEL PLAYING FIELDS

“I’ve got a passion for the underdogs in life and a deep love for children.”

It’s not hard to imagine that Genesee Circuit Court Judge Duncan Beagle is equally comfortable in black-and-white stripes as he is in a black robe—only in different types of court.

The former basketball player, coach, and referee is still an avid sports fan, and as a native son of Flint, he is also dedicated to finding ways to apply this passion to efforts that benefit local kids.

After being appointed to the bench in 1991, Judge Beagle has developed and presides over several court programs geared toward helping at-risk kids: Attendance Court, for truant students; Family Dependency Drug Court, for parents struggling with addiction; and ADAPT Court, to improve the efficiency of paternity cases.

Outside of the courtroom, Judge Beagle works to give local kids a leg up in many ways, including his long-time work with Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Genesee County. At one time, he boasted six official little brothers through the program and several unofficial little brothers and was extremely active with them through organized sports, in particular.

“When you get to change the system and change a kid’s life, that’s the real reward,” Judge Beagle shared.

He eventually served as board president and was named “Big Brother of the Year.”

In addition, Judge Beagle is very proud of his work as chairperson of the Atwood Stadium Authority, which helped to preserve a historic local stadium before it was turned over to Kettering University in 2014.

With a background in Flint’s long tradition of athletics, Judge Beagle—himself inducted into the Greater Flint Area Sports Hall of Fame—says it was an honor to be able to give the city and community back this “living monument” representing so many of their accomplishments.

Starting in 2017, Judge Beagle has organized the Vehicle City Gridiron Classic with three high school football games played at Atwood Stadium on the first day of the season. The event is a draw for new visitors to the city and involves Kettering and local school districts alike.

“I like to work with people, help people, and solve problems,” he remarked.

Having been confined to a wheelchair since an illness struck him in 1991, Judge Beagle has not let that slow him down at all. He has given his time and energy to many additional local organizations during his career: Voices for Children Advocacy Center; Police Athletic League; Genesee County Disability Network; and Flint Rotary Club, to name a few. Also, he served on the State Commission for Disability Concerns.



*Judge Beagle competing in a wheelchair race with his son.
(Photo: Michigan Bar Journal)*



In 2016, Judge Beagle received the Michigan Supreme Court Daniel J. Wright Lifetime Achievement Award for his work in keeping families together.

On why he continues to do what he does, both in and out of the courtroom?

Judge Beagle employs one of his favorite sayings: “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”



Judge Beagle (center) at the dedication of Atwood Stadium. (Photo: MLive)

JUDGE ANNETTE BERRY: INSPIRING THE SPIRIT OF GIVING BACK

“Every person, regardless of their situation or circumstances, has the capacity to care for the well-being of others.”

For Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Annette Berry, this notion was ingrained in her at an early age. “Growing up, my parents and grandparents taught me the importance of giving back to those who are less fortunate,” she shared.

One of the ways that Judge Berry gives back is by supporting the Father Clement H. Kern Foundation in Detroit. Named for the late “Labor Priest” who was profoundly involved in the labor movement in Detroit during the 20th Century, the Foundation supports and advances his mission of helping those who have fallen on hard times. Among his many accomplishments, Monsignor Kern helped found the first free medical clinic in Detroit (Cabrini Clinic), as well as a free legal clinic to serve those who could not afford

legal services.

As current Foundation president, Judge Berry has “provided necessary energy and important leadership,” according to Msgr. Chuck Kosanke, a past president and her colleague on many charitable projects.

The Foundation hosts an annual dinner to honor its namesake and to recognize members of the community who have championed its mission. It also provides financial support to many local organizations,



Judge Berry (left) with Monsignor Dr. Charles Kosanke; the late Dan Neumaier, and the late Rev. Jay Samonie--all past presidents of the Father Kern Foundation.

“We are very involved in the community, and I take our commitment and service to the public very seriously,” remarked Judge Blount.

The court has a Public Service Committee and members of that committee even don bright green t-shirts when they volunteer, bearing their motto: “Proudly Serving Others.” One of the big efforts Judge Blount and her team support is Hug Detroit Day, which is an annual drive in late August to collect backpacks and school supplies for local children in need. This year, the Court helped provide more than 150 backpacks filled with supplies, which were distributed at a neighborhood “Block Party” celebration.

Judge Blount stated, “This is a wonderful venue for us to make our presence known, give back to the community, and to positively impact those we serve. I am so proud of our court for coming together to ensure that our Detroit students have what they need to be successful this school year.”

Efforts like this provide an opportunity for the court to interact with the community in an informal set-



Chief Judge Blount (2nd from left) at the Hug Detroit Day celebration.

ting and share valuable information about the resources available, such as outreach programs, community resources, and specialty courts, adds Judge Blount.

In conjunction with Hug Detroit Day, the court was recognized with several Spirit of Detroit Awards from the Detroit City Council for its improvements in increased efficiency, accessibility, and providing better overall service to the public, as well as for their specialty courts (Drug and Veterans Treatment Courts, Street Outreach Court, and Eviction Diversion Program). The court also received recognition for raising awareness of the needs of the community.

“I am constantly reminded how great the need is for many who appear in our court, and I believe it is better to attempt to help even just a few than to ignore that need,” Judge Blount said. “From providing school supplies and backpacks to the children of our schools to cleaning up our surrounding neighborhoods, our court tries to focus on doing the most good for those we serve.”



Chief Judge Blount (center) welcoming local students to her courtroom in Detroit.

CHIEF JUDGE KATHLEEN BRICKLEY: THE BIGGER PICTURE OF OUTREACH

Merriam-Webster defines community as “a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.”

As Chief Judge of the 36th Circuit Court in Van Buren County, Judge Kathleen Brickley sees the court as “a vital part of our community.”

Three years after being appointed to the bench in 2012, Judge Brickley was appointed to the leadership role and she hasn’t looked back since. In addition to the many projects and tasks she has taken on internally to reengineer the way the court operated, she has also looked outside the courthouse to find inspiration for further innovations.

Given the opportunity to participate in the Michigan Supreme Court’s Leadership Team Academy in 2017, Judge Brickley and Court Administrator Frank Hardester developed a Team Leadership Project with an eye toward integration of the court and the community it serves. The result? The Court to Community Outreach Program was born.

“When we began this program, we found that many of us in the court were already actively involved in volunteer outreach efforts—we just weren’t sharing and coordinating our activities, especially via social media,” Judge Brickley recalled. “Doing so has not only helped us perform outreach more effectively, but it has created—free of charge—positive PR for the court and a morale boost within the court. It is rewarding to be acknowledged for your service and



(l to r) SCAO’s Michigan Judicial Institute Director Dawn McCarty; Van Buren County Circuit Court Administrator Frank Hardester; and Chief Judge Brickley.

to see your coworkers educating or serving the community.”

Judge Brickley explains that Court to Community is a multi-faceted outreach program that focuses on the goals of sharing court information, services, and accomplishments with the community, and doing so in a coordinated fashion.

Internally, the court team has created an all-court policy that makes outreach a priority of the court, centralized the dissemination of outreach efforts, and included Court to Community Outreach as a regular agenda item at Judicial Council and Management Team meetings. In addition to attending events and activities in the community, they are also ramping up communications of their activities by employing various platforms such as a court newsletter, social media, and press releases.

“Too often, people think of courts as a consequence rather than a resource. The reality is that, for many communities, the court is the resource hub—we just



haven't been particularly adept at conveying this," she explained. "By making outreach a formalized priority of the court, we hope to do better."

Through their efforts to bring court programs to the public—education about problem-solving courts, Adoption Day events raising awareness of the need, attending school and local events to talk about juvenile diversion opportunities or the "24/7 Dads" program, collaborating with groups such as Families Against Narcotics—the community can literally see the court as a resource.

Going one step beyond that, Judge Brickley believes that engaging in other activities such as local recreational sports and food drives, for example, people can see the court as a part of the community.

"What we do impacts our neighbors as well as their friends, coworkers, and children," Judge Brickley shared.

"Our judges and our extraordinary staff share the conviction that along with the responsibilities of working

"Too often, people think of courts as a consequence rather than a resource. The reality is that, for many communities, the court is the resource hub."

within the court is the responsibility to look beyond it."

She continued, "Today, many are skeptical of the government, viewing it as one entity working against them. Judges have an ability to educate people on the role of the judiciary and its status as a separate branch of government. And we are in a position to invite community members to be a part of the discussion and a part of the solution."



Participants in Van Buren County Circuit Court's "24/7 Dad" program, along with Abel Munoz (far right), the Court's Early Intervention Case Manager, who helps to provide resources and support for new dads in the community.

JUDGE STACIA BUCHANAN: DELIVERING COMPASSION

“It is important for judges to be in the community in a real way to see how people are living.”

So says Judge Stacia Buchanan, of 54A District Court in Lansing.

But the spark to find a way to give back in her community ignited back before she was appointed to the bench in August 2017.

“As a criminal defense attorney, I met a lot of people suffering from poverty and food insecurity,” she remarked. “I wanted to do my part to help, so I signed up for Meals on Wheels in September 2016.”

And since taking on her role on the bench, she continues to volunteer for Meals on Wheels (MOW).

The Ingham County MOW program is run through the Tri-County Office on Aging. Meals on Wheels provides meals to seniors and disabled persons. Volunteers deliver food to their doors five days per week and they provide frozen meals for the weekend. And even more importantly, the volunteers also provide

regular contact to ensure that all the clients are well (e.g., able to answer the door, able to have a conversation).

“It is very rewarding because the clients are happy to see me, and I am happy to see them,” shared Judge Buchanan. “It is a great reprieve from a job that can be negative and stressful at times.”



Judge Buchanan (above center and right) getting ready to deliver meals.



In addition to Meals on Wheels, Judge Buchanan also enjoys giving her time to other charitable activities, such as adopting a family for the holidays and

providing shoes to those in need through Footprints of Michigan.

Doing whatever she can is important to her.

“Judges are often isolated from the community and the problems that affect their constituents,” she remarked. “This brings joy to help someone, and that helps the judge keep a positive attitude in the courtroom.”



JUDGE FRANK DELUCA: FEEDING A PASSION TO SERVE

“I receive the greatest satisfaction from seeing the joy and happiness on the faces of the children being served by the programs as the meals are being distributed.”

For Lansing’s 54A District Judge Frank DeLuca, volunteering for organizations that help provide the most essential of needs to local families—healthy food—is its own reward.

Judge DeLuca volunteers with the Greater Lansing Food Bank, and specifically its Mobile Food Pantry, because it gives him an opportunity to get to know and bond with constituents “outside of the court atmosphere.” He also believes it is an important extension of his role as an elected official and public servant.

This is a notion that didn’t fall far from the tree—the family tree, that is. Judge DeLuca remembers, as a child, observing his father’s own involvement in the community through service clubs and positions in public office.

“His focus in serving the community was to improve the quality of life for everyone,” shared Judge DeLuca, and that is a goal he continues to pursue through his own efforts.

The Mobile Food Pantry distributes free, fresh, and nonperishable food items to local populations in need. Judge DeLuca says he quickly realized the amount of manpower needed to make the program work and has witnessed, firsthand, how important the benefits are to the people they serve.



Judge DeLuca helping to sort food for the Mobile Pantry.

In addition to the Food Pantry, Judge DeLuca also volunteers with Advent House Ministries (AHM), a faith-based group that focuses on helping those who struggle with poverty and homelessness. Judge DeLuca and his wife, Madeline, regularly prepare and serve breakfast to local families in need.

AHM, which began its outreach efforts in Lansing over 30 years ago, initially offered only a Saturday lunch meal. Today, it operates every weekend and serves more than 34,000 hot meals to more than 2,200 people in need. It also offers a day shelter with meals, children’s programs, literacy and employment resources, and housing assistance.

Despite completing his 18th and final year of serving on the bench, Judge DeLuca has no plans to slow down his volunteer efforts—in fact, he sees himself continuing his involvement well into retirement because as he puts it, “As a volunteer worker, I truly and directly serve the public.” ✍️

JUDGE JOYCE DRAGANCHUK: HELP ON WHEELS

“When you give someone your time, you tell them they are worth it.”

Ingham County Circuit Court Judge Joyce Draganchuk has been doing just that for more than 20 years through the local Meals on Wheels program.

Years before her election to the bench in 2004, Judge Draganchuk knew she wanted to do something for others. She initially volunteered for a literacy program as a tutor to adults in need, and then she eventually discovered Meals on Wheels.

Volunteering with Meals on Wheels entails delivering hot meals to local seniors in need during her lunch hour, and Judge Draganchuk’s regular delivery day also happens to fall on her busiest court day of the week.

“There are days when I feel too stressed to take the time to go on my deliveries. I feel the need to stay at my desk and work,” she admitted. “But then I go deliver the meals and all it takes is the first delivery to remind me that this is my most important work.”

Some clients are alone all day, she explains, and she may be the only person who comes to their home to see them.

“Their faces light up when I knock on their door,” she shared. “They ask so little and it means so much to them. And I cannot lie: it makes me feel 10 feet tall!”

In addition to MOW, Judge Draganchuk also serves on the board of WAI-IAM (pronounced “Way I Am”), which operates sober living houses where people suffering addiction can receive treatment and sup-



Judge Draganchuk on a delivery.

port. And she is not the only judge on the board; Eaton County Judge Julie Reincke also serves on WAI-IAM (see feature on p. 20).

She first encountered the founder of WAI-IAM, a former heroin addict, when he came before her in court on a robbery charge. Today, she notes that he is about 10 years sober, and when he asked her to join the board, she did not hesitate.

Judge Draganchuk credits her mother with instilling in her the desire to give back, although she gets as much out of it as she gives.

“Volunteering is ingrained in me. I was raised with a ‘that’s what you are supposed to do’ attitude,” she remarked. “When I am handing a meal to someone, for instance, there is a real one-on-one human connection and in that moment, it feels like the world is a beautiful place.”



JUDGE HALA JARBOU: HIGHER EDUCATION WARRIOR

“I was the first in my family to graduate from high school, let alone go to college.”

Judge Hala Jarbou’s personal background has greatly influenced her involvement in a young, but growing program at Wayne State University called the Warrior Vision and Impact Program (VIP), named for the school mascot.

Having served on the Oakland County Circuit Court since 2015, and an alum of the Wayne State University School of Law, Judge Jarbou understands the importance of a good education. But even more importantly, she understands the need to remove barriers toward achieving that goal.

And when childhood friend, Michelle Hunt Bruner, Director of Wayne State’s Academic Success Center, encouraged Judge Jarbou’s involvement in a new program the university was developing to support first-generation students and underrepresented populations in higher education, Judge Jarbou was on board.

“I was very enthusiastic about wanting to help with this program,” she said. “As a very young immigrant to this country, I understand the challenges faced by the students it tries to reach.”

Warrior VIP works with outside partners to ensure the students’ successful transition into college, foster their positive engagement in the university setting, and prepare them to challenge themselves as leaders beyond graduation. The program provides them with academic, career, research, financial literacy, and mentoring support to achieve these goals.

“As a judge who oversees both civil and criminal cases, I unfortunately see a lot of young defendants come through my court with limited educational backgrounds. Obtaining a GED and furthering your education are goals I stress in every sentencing that I



Judge Jarbou (center) participating in the Warrior VIP Speaker Series.

pronounce,” explained Judge Jarbou. “The Warrior VIP provides a great foundation for success for students who might otherwise not have any mentors or resources to rely on.”

As a Warrior VIP speaker and mentor, Judge Jarbou is part of the program’s focus of

introducing students to professionals in a variety of fields to help them get a closer look at a variety of career paths, learn more about a particular industry, and receive career advice.

Judge Jarbou says that she has gotten as much out of her efforts as she has put in. “Judges see a great deal of conflict and negativity in court on a regular basis,” she shared. “Being a part of a program such as this helps bring positivity to my daily routine and reinforces how I can help improve my community.”

JUDGE KAREN MCDONALD: PROTECTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN AT RISK

“I think it is critical to take the knowledge I’ve learned and identify the needs of the community.”

One in three families in Michigan are affected by domestic violence, and women are the victims in 85-95 percent of all reported domestic violence cases.

This statistic compelled Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Karen McDonald to seek out ways to help provide at-risk women and children the protection and resources they need.

Having served for six years in the Family Division, Judge McDonald presides over domestic cases involving divorce, custody, paternity and support, neglect, adoption, juvenile delinquencies, and personal protection orders. She also handles the permanency planning docket and the juvenile drug court.

When questioned about domestic violence cases, she noted that “Children in homes where there is domestic violence face significant challenges and are at increased risk for repeating the same violence and a host of other things in their adult lives.”

It is consequently important to Judge McDonald to address some of the major issues affecting at-risk children and to help alleviate the cycle of repeat violence. Judge McDonald serves on the local Child Death Review Team and Oakland County Youth Sui-

cide Prevention Task Force. Her intensive training from the National Judicial Institute on Domestic Violence prompted her to develop a training program for the court’s clerks and other staff members to improve the services provided to domestic violence victims who seek personal protection orders.



Judge McDonald receiving her award alongside Chelsea Holmes, of the Coordinating Council Against Domestic Violence.

“The majority of domestic violence is unreported. When victims actually do report, it is so important that they have appropriate access to the justice system,” remarked Judge McDonald. “The judiciary can play a role in this by ensuring that victims feel safe when they go to court and court staff and personnel are trained to interact with victims in a respectful, dignified way.”

Judge McDonald also serves as a member of the Foster Care Review Board Program Advisory Committee, where she advocates for children who are placed in the care of the State of Michigan. She recently received the Joan E. Young Champion of Children Award for her work in this area.

In addition, Judge McDonald was recently honored by Oakland County’s Coordinating Council Against Domestic Violence for providing exemplary service to victims of domestic violence, and specifically, for her work in both seeking out and helping to promote education on the subject.

“I think being a family court judge gives me a unique perspective on the issues facing children and families,” reflected Judge McDonald. “While I enjoy the job very much, I think it is critical to take the knowledge I’ve learned and identify the needs of the community. Speaking and training in the community helps me better understand the people who come before me.”



CHIEF JUDGE PATRICK MCGRAW: SERVING THOSE WHO PROTECT

Saginaw County's finest and bravest are able to rest a little easier knowing that their community has their back—just as they watch over and protect that very same community.

This is largely thanks to an initiative started, in part, by Judge Patrick McGraw in 1996.

Judge McGraw, who has served in Saginaw County Probate Court since 1999, also handles circuit court criminal and civil dockets, as well as the Swift and Sure Sanctions Probation Program. He currently serves as Chief Judge for the Saginaw County Trial Court.

But before he joined the bench, he and a group of friends saw a need in the Saginaw area for an organization like other clubs that were starting around the country—including the original club in Detroit, founded in 1952—that supported first responders and their families.

“I felt we needed to give back to the heroes who sacrifice themselves so that we could continue to work, play, and sleep in peace and comfort, knowing that there is someone out there watching over us,” Judge McGraw shared.

Thus, the 100 Club of Saginaw County was born. The Club's main mission is to acknowledge and repay the people who have risked their lives to protect their neighbors. It is a membership organization consisting of Saginaw County residents who, through their

dues, contribute each year for the benefit of Saginaw-area families of police officers, firefighters, and other county officers—not to mention state and federal officers and agents—who have been killed in the line of duty in Saginaw County.

Judge McGraw clarifies that the Club isn't a charity, but rather, a way of “repaying a debt to—and looking out for—those who have given their lives as they were looking out for us.”

In addition to helping the families of fallen local heroes, the 100 Club also provides recognition of current officers and firefighters who have gone above



Chief Judge McGraw (far right) honoring local firefighters.

and beyond the call of duty, and grants funds to help them purchase equipment needed to keep them safe on the job.

Judge McGraw feels that judges, in particular, have a big role to play in their communities when it comes to leadership and service. “People see us in a very serious role while we are performing our judicial functions, and some think we are here strictly to punish or adjudicate without actually knowing what is going on in our community,” he explained. “But by giving back and participating in local organizations, residents can see that we are human beings just like them and we have the same feelings and obligations as they do.”



Trooper McKay

“The academy, which is required to have attorneys teach their legal courses, thought my experience as a state trooper provided a unique perspective and ability to relate the material to the cadets,” Judge McKay recalled.

In addition to teaching at KVPA, he has also taught criminal interdiction at the State Police Academy and participated in MSP report writing exercises.

To say that Judge McKay is passionate about continuing to serve those who wear the uniform would be an understatement. “Our society could not exist without these men and women who answer citizens’ calls and patrol our communities. Police officers routinely have to make complex legal decisions without the benefit of time to do research or consult others,” he remarked. “I know firsthand how difficult these situations can be for police officers and how expertly they have to know the law.”

He also notes how demoralizing police work can sometimes be, having been spit on, bled on, seriously injured twice, had bricks thrown at him in a riot, and having witnessed a partner get shot during

a traffic stop. And most difficult of all, attending many, many funerals for fellow officers.

Judge McKay is quick to point out that none of these experiences makes him unique among those in uniform, but they remind him how important it is to continue supporting the profession.

Judge McKay shared, “I take special pride in being a part of not just training these men and women to be professionals, but also in encouraging these

“We owe it to those we serve to be leaders in our community and demonstrate that we take seriously the responsibility we are given by the people who elect us.”



Judge McKay (center) with some of the State Police cadets he has taught at the academy.

citizens who choose service over self by becoming police officers.”

In addition to being inspired by his previous profession, Judge McKay is also driven to give back in this way because of his role on the bench.

“Judges hold a special position in our system and communities,” he said. “We owe it to those we serve to be leaders in our community and demonstrate that we take seriously the responsibility we are given by the people who elect us.”

CHIEF JUDGE GEORGE MERTZ: MENTORING FUTURE LEGAL PROS

“In a society where an emphasis is put on immediate results, the kids learn what it is to have perseverance, dedication, and a commitment to putting in long hours in order to ultimately be successful. I believe these skills make for stronger adults and a stronger community.”

Judge George Mertz isn't just describing the local youth program with which he participates, but he is also describing the bigger picture in the Michigan judiciary.

As Chief Judge of the 46th Circuit Court—serving Crawford, Kalkaska, and Otsego Counties—Judge Mertz was first appointed in January 2013. Since 2014, he has volunteered to coach students at Gaylord St. Mary High School through the local YMCA's "Youth in Government Model Judiciary Program." Or MJP, says Judge Mertz, for short.

Judge Mertz followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, the late Judge Dennis Murphy, when he took up the mantle of volunteering with MJP—something he says was very important to him.

“I think we all had mentors who helped us grow and become successful adults—I know I did. I think it is critical that young people today have adults who can help them grow and develop the skills and confidence that will benefit them their entire lives,” he shared.

Judge Mertz says that it is also personally rewarding to watch these young “lawyers” start from scratch and develop into confident individuals, fearlessly arguing a case in front of a room of spectators.

“Like any coach, I get fired up during the compe-

tion when they make a good argument or give a correct response to an objection, and am there to explain and help them work out problems and mistakes,” he remarked. “I enjoy watching them compete and seeing the hours of work and practice pay off for them.”

Judge Mertz believes this program benefits the kids by teaching them critical thinking skills, how to analyze a problem, and how to present themselves publicly with confidence and competence.



Chief Judge Mertz (center) and MJP students representing the community at an event.



“Coach” Mertz also says that the students learn about working toward a long-term goal. To get ready for a legal competition in the spring, they started working in October and will spend months on preparation and practice in order to be able to perform in March. He calls it “a marathon, not a sprint.”

Judge Mertz believes that judges have a duty to set an example in the community for everyone—young and old. “We are public figures and, like it or not, people notice what we do both in and out of the courtroom,” he shared. “That visibility gives us a unique opportunity to be role models to young people and to inspire adults to get involved—whether it’s in a youth program, such as this, or other community or charitable organizations.” ✎



Chief Judge Mertz (far left) with MJP students at a competition.

JUDGE JULIE REINCKE: SMOOTHING THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

It all comes down to the “Golden Rule” for Eaton County District Judge Julie Reincke.

“My parents modeled my ‘giving back’ behavior,” Judge Reincke recalled.

Through their volunteer work at church and leadership roles in various community organizations, she says they “exemplified the ‘Golden Rule.’” So it comes as no surprise that she has followed in their footsteps.

Appointed in 2006 to the 56A District Court in Eaton County, Judge Reincke not only employs this concept in the court, but also outside the court in her role as Vice President of Eaton County Families Against Narcotics (FAN), which she was active in launching. She was inspired to take action after receiving feedback from one of her probation officers and an undersheriff on

the need to help educate the public, law enforcement, and the legal community about the problems in their area stemming from drug addiction, as well as the need to support families affected by addiction.

Founded in 2007 by Macomb County Judge Linda Davis, FAN is a community-based program for those seeking recovery, those in recovery, and family members and friends affected by addiction—a major focus on FAN. The group works to educate communities of the dangers of prescription drug abuse, especially painkillers, as well as illegal drugs, such as heroin. There are currently 21 chapters across Michigan, including the one in Eaton County.

“I derive great satisfaction in being able to participate in the healing of our people,” shared Judge Reincke. “I am repeatedly inspired every day by the people who come before me in court, many of whom have really difficult lives.”

JUDGE REINCKE

In presiding over both a sobriety court and domestic violence treatment court, she also sees firsthand the effects of recovery programs on individuals who are struggling with substance use disorders and/or domestic violence. According to Judge Reincke, the majority of people who serve probationary sentences in these treatment courts emerge as “new people”—with integrity, self-confidence, good relationships, sobriety, better jobs, and better financial circumstances.

She continues to help these individuals through her role on the executive board of WAI-IAM Rise (pronounced “Way I Am”), a local sober-living facility that also works with local treatment courts. The organization was founded by a mother-son duo who survived nearly a decade in the world of addiction.

“It is important for judges to give back to their communities, because most of us have been given so much throughout our lives,” reflected Judge



Judge Reincke in her courtroom.

Reincke. “We owe it to others to share some of our advantages.” ✎

JUDGE MICHELLE RICK: SHINING THE LIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE

“Being a judge is much more than just presiding in a courtroom in a black robe. A judge is a public servant.”

For 29th Circuit Court Judge Michelle Rick, this philosophy provides the inspiration for her work on and off the bench. Although the court serves Clinton and Gratiot Counties, her volunteer efforts have extended far beyond the area.

Appointed to the Michigan Human Trafficking Commission in 2014, which operates under the Office of the Attorney General, Judge Rick represents judges and courts. The two main goals of the Commission are to assess the threat human trafficking poses to Michigan residents and develop policy recommendations to promote its exposure and prevention.

To that end, Judge Rick participates in human trafficking trainings for courts, law enforcement, and other stakeholder groups. She also frequently presents at community events around the state, and has advocated for a local trafficking task force in Clinton County.



Some of these events have included several screenings of the Michigan-based documentary film, “Break the Chain,” which aims to raise awareness of the pervasive problem of human trafficking—in Michigan and beyond. Judge Rick helped to bring a screening of the film to the Michigan Hall of Justice in Lansing for justices, judges, and others working in the court system.

In addition to her efforts to shine the spotlight on the issue of human trafficking, Judge Rick says she is committed to teaching kids and young adults about career opportunities in the legal profession. Through her position on the board of the National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ), Judge Rick has been instrumental in bringing “MentorJet” events to Michigan law schools with a “speed dating” approach—spending several allotted minutes with each mentor before moving to a different station—and starting a similar mentoring program with the State Bar of Michigan called “Face of Justice.”

The Face of Justice Program is based on the NAWJ “Color of Justice” program, which encourages young women and minorities to consider legal and judicial careers.

“The program encourages high school students to see themselves as a face of justice,” Judge Rick explained. “By connecting with youth and law students regarding the practicing of law, we are promoting diversity, equality, and fairness. This is a great opportunity to excite and influence those up-and-coming lawyers.”

Face of Justice events have been held across the state, including at the Michigan Hall of Justice in Lansing and at 36th District Court in Detroit. In addition to lawyers and judges, other mentors include law enforcement officers and others affiliated with the criminal justice system.

Judge Rick believes community involvement is vital, no matter the topic. “By engaging in community events,” she shared, “judges build confidence and trust with the public.”



Judge Rick (center) at a local human trafficking event.



Judge Rick (front row, 2nd from right) with other judges and attorneys giving their time to a MentorJet event at WMU-Cooley Law School.



Judge Rick in a one-on-one mentoring session with a local high school student during the State Bar of Michigan’s “Face of Justice” event.

JUDGE SARA SMOLENSKI: THE QUALITY OF CARE—AND OF CARING

Recalling the time she wanted to help a 4th-grade classmate overcome his fear of reading aloud, Judge Sara Smolenski has always cared about helping others.

This desire to help improve the lives of others around her also led to her decision to become an attorney—she says she wanted to speak for others who could not speak for themselves.

Elected in 1990 to the 63rd District Court in Grand Rapids and appointed Chief Judge six years later, Judge Smolenski has continued helping people beyond the bench by lending her support to numerous charitable organizations and efforts in West Michigan over the years.

Being a part of Hospice of Michigan (HOM), in particular, is very near and dear to her. “Both of my parents were helped by Hospice of Michigan at the end of their lives, and I was very impressed by their care and concern,” she shared.

She was asked to be a board member after that experience, which happened 10 years ago, and she is a past chairperson of the HOM Foundation Board. On why she became involved, Judge Smolenski simply said, “It’s the right thing to do.”

Founded in 1979, Hospice of Michigan never turns anyone away—one of the things that appealed to Judge Smolenski. It has the only statewide dedicated pediatric hospice and support program, and offers

expert medical care, plus emotional and spiritual support for the entire family.

Another organization that is important to Judge Smolenski is the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, with which she has been involved for the last 15-plus years, including as a speaker at the Foundation’s annual dinner.

“We need to help eliminate the stigma around mental health illnesses, and we need to proactively normalize the need for mental health treatment,” remarked Judge Smolenski. “The Mental Health Foundation works toward that, and is vital in providing assistance to people in our community with mental health issues.”

When it comes to volunteering in the community, Judge Smolenski believes that it is incumbent upon judges to lead the way. “Judges have a unique opportunity to set an example that giving back helps everyone,” she said. “It helps make our community stronger.”



Chief Judge Smolenski lending her support to a local event.



And not only does Judge Smolenski talk the talk, but she also walks the walk. She regularly hosts school groups at the court to help educate students about the judicial branch and to give them a first-hand look into the court system.

She also gets out of the courtroom frequently to speak at community events, educational programs, charitable drives, and civic and community groups. Among the many local organizations she has supported are the American Cancer Society, Kids Food Basket, YWCA, Michigan Women’s Foundation, and Senior Neighbors.

And her main message when she speaks to these groups? “Every person can contribute to helping others.”



Chief Judge Smolenski with a group of visitors in her courtroom. (Photo: GRCC “The Collegiate”)

JUDGE SUSAN SNIEGOWSKI: DIVING INTO MENTORING

One can literally say that Judge Susan Sniegowski gets along “swimmingly” with kids in the Ludington area.

In fact, as a longtime competitive swimmer and coach, Judge Sniegowski has put those skills to use for their benefit.

When she isn’t presiding over her docket in the 51st Circuit Court in Mason and Lake Counties, where she has served since 2015, Judge Sniegowski can often be found at the pool, coaching local kids ranging from 5 to 18 years old in several recreational swimming leagues.

“I believe that engaging children in positive activities, such as youth sports or clubs, helps them develop into well-rounded individuals,” Judge Sniegowski explained. “My own experiences with competitive swimming have taught me perseverance, goal setting, time management, endurance, and the benefit of hard work. I hope I can pass this on to future generations.”

Currently, she coaches the year-round Ludington Recreation Swim Team, which competes through USA Swimming in both Michigan Swimming and the West Michigan Swim League.

Swimming and coaching have been such a big part of Judge Sniegowski’s life that it is hard to determine whether her law career was built around that or vice

versa. She began coaching while she was still in high school and continued through college.

Although she took occasional breaks from it—during law school, before her son was born—she kept returning to it, even while she was building her law practice and now as a judge.

“I believe it is important to be involved in my community outside the courtroom because it provides balance and it allows me to be actively engaged with the people I serve,” shared Judge Sniegowski.

Speaking of engagement, Judge Sniegowski recently experienced her two worlds as coach and judge overlapping when she had the opportunity to swear in one of her former swimmers to the Michigan Bar. In addition, the attorney who moved for her admission was also one of Judge Sniegowski’s former swimmers.

“When I started practicing law in Northern Michigan, there were very few female attorneys, so I am very proud to see young women with whom I worked as swimmers pursue careers in the law,” Judge Sniegowski said. “I hope my work and my involvement with local youth inspires others to further their education and consider careers in the law.”



Judge Sniegowski (top, center) giving her swimmers some poolside pointers.



Judge Sniegowski with two of her former swimmers-- both of whom are now attorneys and one of whom she was able to swear in.

“I believe that engaging children in positive activities, such as youth sports or clubs, helps them develop into well-rounded individuals.”



JUDGE MATTHEW SWITALSKI: FROM ONE BENCH TO ANOTHER

“You have to have the right temperament to be a coach and to be a judge. You cannot be a screamer or one who likes to demean people—on either bench.”

These are sage words from Judge Matthew Switalski, who spends much of his time on the hardcourt when he is not presiding over his docket in Macomb County Circuit Court.

Volunteering as Girls Varsity Basketball Coach at St. Mary Catholic School in Mt. Clemens has not only given Judge Switalski a chance to spend more time with his own kids, but it has also given him an opportunity to share “all the life lessons you can learn from competitive athletics.”

Judge Switalski first volunteered to coach five years ago when his oldest daughter was a 3rd grader and the school needed coaches.

“These girls deserve someone who supports them, who gives them confidence, who teaches them that it is okay to be aggressive and strong,” shared Judge Switalski. “My style of basketball raises their self-esteem and gives them tremendous confidence—not just on the court, but as young women, in general.”

Although the team has been successful, Judge



Judge Switalski (far right) with his team.

Switalski admits they had to “take their lumps” at the beginning, when they were younger than their opponents. But last year, the team achieved a 16-2 record, won the Regina Thanksgiving Tournament, and won its division. This year, they have started 5-0 and repeated as Regina Thanksgiving Champions. Judge Switalski says that the girls are proud to be Lady Mountaineers, and their school and community are proud of them, too.



Winning the championship!

“Judges are blessed with great jobs, a great living, and significant recognition from the public,” remarked Judge Switalski. “We are lucky to have these jobs, and we have a duty to show our gratitude by giving back in some way to our community.”

On his coaching future?

Judge Switalski says he

plans to coach his two younger daughters and their friends until they get to high school. “My 7th graders believe they can win the title next year,” he said. “And I am already plotting the future for my 2nd grader and her friends.”

JUDGE JOSEPH TOIA: FOSTERING THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT

“When I heard a child say, ‘You showed me that I mattered,’ I realized that we can change a life just by showing we care.”

So says one of Santa’s busiest helpers, who happens to live right in Macomb County.

Better known—since his appointment in 2015—as Macomb County Circuit Court Judge Joseph Toia, this holiday helper has given his time for 12 years toward making Christmas special for thousands of Michigan children every year who are living in foster care.

Judge Toia and his wife, Theresa, were inspired to begin this effort in 2006, after their daughter, who at the time was a foster care caseworker for the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), mentioned that for the second year in a row, none of the children in her caseload received anything for Christmas. The next year, they provided Christmas presents for 47 children in foster care.

However, once they delivered the wrapped presents to DHHS, they learned that there were more than 1200 kids in foster care that year, most of whom would not receive any gifts. In fact, one of the older kids said, “On Christmas morning, I didn’t want to get out of bed.”

“We decided that could not happen again,” related Judge Toia.

He and his family reached out to family, friends, and other contacts for more support, and soon enough, the project became too big to continue out of their home. They were able to secure donated space



*Judge Toia, or as he is known during Christmastime:
“Head Bag Dragger.”*

through the generosity of local commercial property owners.

In 2008, they officially founded Friends of Foster Kids, and in 2011, it was granted 501(c)(3) status. The effort has since grown to serve all kids living in foster care in Macomb County, Oakland County, and beyond. Working directly with DHHS and their volunteer network of “angels” helps to fill the gaps for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect and placed in temporary housing or shelters, explains Judge Toia.

Over the past 12 years, approximately 180,000 gifts have been donated, wrapped, and delivered to more than 15,000 children living in foster care. After learning of other gaps in need, Friends of Foster Kids



expanded its services to include providing immediate needs when children are first coming into foster care, as well as a graduate program to help children who are “aging out,” whether they are transitioning into college, the workforce, or independent living.

So how has this initiative benefited the community?

Judge Toia says that many of the kids who have been helped by Friends of Foster Kids have since graduated high school and/or college, and have begun careers. Some have come back to volunteer, or to speak on behalf of the program and share their stories.

A future goal for Friends of Foster Kids is to recruit local professionals to share their skills or provide services that directly benefit a child in foster care, such as orthodontics, legal help, scholarship opportunities, job searching, and more.

On why it’s important for judges to give back, Judge Toia remarked, “Not many people have the chance to meet their judges outside the courtroom. If we lead by example, we can continue to help improve our communities and inspire the public we serve.” 🗣️



Dozens of bags of wrapped presents housed at the Friends of Foster Kids headquarters awaiting delivery to children in foster care in time for Christmas.



A well-oiled machine - “Angels” wrapping and bagging gifts.

JUDGE MICHAEL WARREN: PASSIONATE PATRIOT EDUCATOR

For a man who often sports an American flag bowtie, it is no surprise that Judge Michael Warren possesses what can easily be described as a strong passion for American civics education and involvement. Clearly, that passion runs in the family.

Outside of his role on the bench of the Oakland County Circuit Court, Judge Warren has given much of his time to advancing efforts to educate more students—locally and beyond—about American history and civics on several fronts.

He and his then-10-year-old daughter jointly founded an effort in 2009 called “Patriot Week.” Judge Warren gives his daughter, Leah, credit as the driving force behind launching the idea.

“Leah pounded on a restaurant table and demanded a new celebration for America,” he remarked. “Many of our current holidays have become overly commercialized or have lost their deeper meaning. We felt the need to invigorate our appreciation and understanding of America’s spirit.”

So what is Patriot Week all about?

“Patriot Week renews America’s spirit by deepening the appreciation of the First Principles, Founding Fathers and other patriots, vital documents and

speeches, and flags that make America the greatest nation in world history,” he explained.

Judge Warren serves as the Chair and President of the 501(c)(3) Patriot Week nonprofit organization. Patriot Week is anchored by the key dates of September 11 (the anniversary of the terrorist attacks) and September 17 (Constitution Day, the anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution). He reaches out to organizations in Michigan and around the country to encourage further awareness and involvement.

Currently, more than 15 other states have recognized Patriot Week with official gubernatorial and legislative proclamations and resolutions. In addition, scores of other public and private entities have gotten involved: K-12 schools; universities and



Judge Warren and his daughter, Leah, who cofounded “Patriot Week.”



law schools; student groups; community organizations (e.g., Rotaries, Kiwanis, religious, etc.); local governments; courts; law firms; businesses; libraries; hospitals; and many others. According to Judge Warren, these entities are engaging in a wide range of grassroots activities, including panel discussions, speakers, lesson plans, festivals, parades, picnics, commemorations, and more.



Judge Warren delivering a presentation through the Michigan Council on Social Studies.

“The grassroots effort is renewing the spirit of America, one person at a time, and is spreading throughout the nation,” he shared.

One might say that, to Judge Warren, all education is local. Closer to home, he serves as the Education Chair of the Cornerstone Education Group, which manages

“Through this effort, we are focused on improving depth, ensuring accuracy, and integrating student-centered learning. We also aim to ensure the standards are not biased, especially in American history and civics. We are aiming to create a model for the nation.”

a network of Detroit-based charter schools serving 3,500 K-12 students.

He has facilitated the development of the learning expectations for students, and is heading up an education improvement plan focused on character education, American history and civics,

and literacy. A former employee of Cornerstone, he has served on the board of directors of Cornerstone-related organizations for about 15 years.

Most recently, Judge Warren has been tapped to serve on a state Task Force working to improve K-12 social studies standards in Michigan.

“Through this effort, we are focused on improving depth, ensuring accuracy, and integrating student-centered learning,” he explained. “We also aim to ensure the standards are not biased, especially in American history and civics. We are aiming to create a model for the nation.”

Judge Warren served on the previous standard-setting committee, as well as the Michigan Board of Education’s Task Force on Social Studies.

With Judge Warren’s reelection last year, he is excited to continue serving on the bench as well as continue his educational efforts in the broader community. ✎

JUDGE TRACEY YOKICH: KEEPING KIDS HEALTHY & SAFE

“Service” is much more than just a seven-letter word for Macomb County Circuit Court Judge Tracey Yokich.

From her previous roles in the Michigan Air National Guard and the Michigan House of Representatives to her current role on the bench, she is well-versed on what it means to serve the public. But this focus was instilled in her long before she charted her career path.

“As far back as I can remember, my parents were always engaged in helping others,” she shared. “I remember my father being concerned about whether our neighbors had food on the table, access to good and affordable health care, safe working conditions, and a living wage.”

Judge Yokich was first appointed to the Macomb County Probate Court in 2003 and a year later, she was elected to the Circuit Court, where she currently serves in the Family Division.

With her docket consisting of issues relating to the welfare and well-being of children—divorce, child abuse and neglect, juvenile offenders—Judge Yokich is passionate about giving back outside of the courtroom to efforts with that same focus.

Shortly after joining the Family Division in 2004, she says she “jumped at the chance” to serve on the Governor’s Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect for what ended up being a nine-year stretch.

Judge Yokich has had the opportunity to serve on a number of local health-related boards where she developed a deep appreciation for many of the challenges facing families in their struggle for access to affordable and quality health care.

In 2008, she joined the Children’s Hospital of Michigan (CHM) Northeast Advisory Board. “Through the Advisory Board, I was given the opportunity to provide community input on a variety of issues, including access to health care,” she explained.

Three years later, she joined the main CHM Board of Trustees, where she continues to serve today.

“My time with Children’s Hospital has been very personally rewarding and I couldn’t be prouder to be able to support the health care professionals who care for children,” said Judge Yokich. “With my very talented colleagues on the Board and an extraordinary staff of health care professionals, Children’s Hospital works to provide exceptional health care to Michigan’s most vulnerable patients.”





Pictured in the new lobby of Children's Hospital of Michigan (l to r): CHM Chief Nursing Officer Shawn Levitt; CHM Chief Executive Officer Luanne Thomas Ewald; CHM Board of Trustees Chair Erica Ward Gerson; and CHM Board Member Judge Yokich.

Michigan Supreme Court Justice Kurtis Wilder, who serves on the CHM Foundation Board, hails Judge Yokich's contributions. "Health care is such an important issue to our community and there is no one who is a greater advocate than Judge Yokich," he remarked.

Prior to giving her time on the CHM Board, Judge Yokich has also volunteered with many other local organizations, including Turning Point shelter (for victims of domestic violence) and a free legal clinic based at Most Holy Trinity Church in Detroit.

"I have been very blessed," remarked Judge Yokich. "I hope that I will always have the energy, capacity, and compassion to help those who are in need, especially children." ✎

"I have been very blessed. I hope that I will always have the energy, capacity, and compassion to help those who are in need, especially children."

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