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Judge Mattina draws record crowd
Receives Law School’s highest honor

His court sees some of the most joyous events in human life, and some of the saddest. From adoptions to divorces to estate settlements, Erie County Surrogate Judge Mattina administers justice with an even hand, a sense of compassion and unmatched professionalism.

Those were some of the accolades when Judge Mattina was presented with the 1998 Edwin F. Jaeckle Award before a standing-room-only crowd at the Hyatt Regency Buffalo in November. The Jaeckle Award is the highest honor UB Law School and the UB Law Alumni Association can bestow.

Mattina’s career in law and public service includes terms as an assistant Erie County district attorney, a Buffalo City Court judge, an Erie County Court judge and a State Supreme Court justice. He was elected Erie County surrogate in 1982 and re-elected easily in 1990.

Beyond the bench, Judge Mattina has served on the Legislative Advisory Committee established by the Office of Court Administration. He also has spoken extensively to young people on the dangers of drug abuse and has worked to promote compassion for the mentally ill. He is known for his collegial relationship with members of the local bar, and among the speakers at the Jaeckle Award presentation were a number attesting to the high esteem in which he is held by his colleagues.

“Judge Mattina is a people person,” said Sue S. Gardner ’76, an attorney with the Buffalo firm Kavinoky & Cook. “That is a great attribute for any judge, but it is perhaps particularly important for a surrogate judge. His court is often the only court with which the average citizen comes in contact, and their experiences there shape their whole understanding of the judicial process. He is dignified but not intimidating; patient and, when appropriate, compassionate.

“He has developed a close working relationship with the members of the estate and probate bar. He has fostered the atmosphere of shared concerns and mutual cooperation between the court and the practicing bar.”

Gardner mentioned particularly “Adoption Day,” the Wednesday docket when the court considers petitions for adoption. It is a heartwarming sight, she noted, to see the judge with an infant on his lap, posing for pictures flanked by the proud and relieved new parents.

Peter J. Fiorella Jr. ’63, past president of the UB Law Alumni Association, gave a brief history of the honoree’s 42-year legal career. “He has given freely of his time to educate young people on the dangers of drug abuse, to promote compassion toward the mentally ill, and to eliminate discrimination and prejudice,” Fiorella said. “Above and beyond his civic and judicial roles, Joe Mattina has always had a unique policy of offering to both lawyers and community leaders something that those who have achieved power and prestige often forget: accessibility. There has never been a lawyer or an individual who has not been given an opportunity to have a conference, a telephone call, a meeting, lunch or dinner with the Surrogate. He has not allowed the title Surrogate of Erie County to...
interfere with his own title: friend to all the people."

Added New York State Supreme Court Justice Vincent E. Doyle Jr. ’56: "He has been my pal. Our relationship has always been close, a little rocky on occasion, but never without affection for one another and never without the highest esteem and respect on my part for Judge Mattina and what he has been able to do in his career. Joe, it’s your day. God bless you, and enjoy it."

Quoting from the award itself, Thomas E. Headrick, University provost and former dean of the Law School, read: "In recognition of his achievements as an outstanding and nationally recognized jurist who is devoted to the betterment of the judicial system and the legal system. He is highly respected for his well-reasoned and innovative opinions. He has dispensed justice with a strong and even hand, yet with sensitivity and compassion. Judge Mattina has earned the respect and admiration of his colleagues and has brought great honor to his Law School."

The honoree, who was greeted with a standing ovation, said, "This has been one of the greatest weekends of my professional life." He noted that the previous night he had received the Treat Award for Excellence from the National College of Probate Judges and had taken the red-eye flight back from San Diego, Calif.

"Words cannot express how I feel in receiving the Jaeckle Award," he said. The judge gave special thanks to the practicing bar, and to his staff — "the people who make me look so good."