10-1-2006

Eastward and Upward: Eugene F. Pigott, Jr. '73 Settles in on New York's Highest Court

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol19/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.
correspondence – but an even greater responsibility as an associate justice of New York's highest court.

He was appointed in August by Gov. George E. Pataki, the last high court appointment by the Republican governor, who called him “a man of extraordinary character, intelligence, integrity, collegiality and commitment to the rule of law.” Pigott had made the shortlist three times previously for a seat on the Court of Appeals.

The move comes as the crowning achievement of a long legal career that began at UB Law School but was incubated when he was growing up on a family farm near Rochester, with Perry Mason on TV. “I always wanted to be a trial lawyer,” Pigott says, “and I always thought, and still do, that trial lawyers are the jet pilots of the profession.”

He graduated from LeMoyne College in Syracuse, and enrolled at UB Law in 1968 – only to be drafted, yanked out of class in November of his first year, and sent to Vietnam as an interpreter. “I was in a Civil Affairs unit and was called a logistics adviser,” he says. “My job was to talk to the locals as we would rebuild the schools and offices that had been destroyed. It was a rebuilding process more than anything else.”

He was discharged after a two-year tour of duty, and went right back to Eagle Street – this was in the school’s final years before its move to Amherst – with the GI Bill kicking in for tuition, and with a renewed sense of purpose. “UB could not have been nicer,” Pigott says. “They told us when we got drafted – and I was far from the only one – that they would reserve a seat for us when we came back. And they did.

Those two years in the Army were eye-opening for me, to get outside that comfort zone of being a student. You are talking to soldiers and you realize that this is their whole life – they are going to do this job for the next 40 years. And you come to realize that your education is not a game.”

He was discharged after a two-year tour of duty, and went right back to Eagle Street – this was in the school’s final years before its move to Amherst – with the GI Bill kicking in for tuition, and with a renewed sense of purpose. “UB could not have been nicer,” Pigott says. “They told us when we got drafted – and I was far from the only one – that they would reserve a seat for us when we came back. And they did.

Those two years in the Army were eye-opening for me, to get outside that comfort zone of being a student. You are talking to soldiers and you realize that this is their whole life – they are going to do this job for the next 40 years. And you come to realize that your education is not a game.”

Like the other law students of his day, he frequented the courts when he was not in class – or clerking for the five-member firm Offermann, Fallon, Mahoney & Adner, in the Statler Build-
Pigott has become known as a lawyers’ judge – someone who understands the stresses attorneys are under as they prepare and argue cases.

He has become known as a lawyers’ judge – someone who understands the stresses attorneys are under as they prepare and argue cases. “I absolutely love lawyers,” he says. “I think lawyers are the greatest people walking the earth and, jokes aside, criticism aside, everything else, it is unbelievable to me what lawyers do. My whole philosophy on the bench is to take care of the lawyers. By taking care of them, you just show them the respect they deserve. Give them the day in court that they need, and count on them to properly represent their client. I am rarely disappointed.”

Court observers also have noted his sense of humor, even during proceedings. That, he said, is something he will carry with him to Albany.

“It is a big deal to go to the Appeals Court,” he says. “You do not need a bunch of dour, sour, stem-looking jurists looking down at you. I try to keep it as light as I can. It is easy to be a bully as a judge, but where does that get you?”

He is proud of his record of fostering diversity, most recently recognized with a “Champion of Diversity” award from the Rochester Black Bar Association for his work to recruit minority law clerks to the Appellate Division. “The cities that I am most aware of have done a tremendous job, and continue to try, to integrate police and the fire departments and the government,” he says. “I think the legal profession has to be next. I think the bar does, I think the bench does, and I think the more we do, the better off we are. “And UB has to be extremely proud of itself for its diversity. My experience of the Law School is that it has the most diverse student body that I have seen.”

Pigott makes his home on Grand Island with his wife, Peggy. Their daughter Martha, a recent graduate of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, has joined the Peace Corps and is awaiting assignment, probably to Africa; their son David, who went to West Point and is a captain in the Army, has just finished his second tour of duty in Iraq.