

It's My Honor to Introduce ...Her Honor

BY DAN AZNOFF, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

K.K. Norman is a well known personality in New Orleans. She is involved in charity work with the Lady of the Holy Cross, an instructor to young people in the fine Southern art of manners and social decorum, and even a ballroom dance instructor. And...oh yes...she is also a city court judge.

As publisher, sometimes I get to do what a lot of people would like to do. I can talk about someone I both admire and call a friend. She is a neighbor of mine as well as the instructor in the ballroom dance lessons my wife and I were taking. If you think that has nothing to do with claims training, then I say, "Class in session." Known as "The Judge of Love," which we'll explain later, she has some insightful words to claim professionals.

— Carl Van, Publisher

Twenty years ago Mary Norman took time away from her duties as the law clerk in the Louisiana Court of Appeals to instruct young people in the fine Southern art of manners and social decorum.

As the presiding judge in Section D of the First City Court and in Second City Court in New Orleans today, she makes every attempt to project some of those same basic social skills to attorneys in

her courtroom who represent some of the largest companies in America.

"By the time we were through with those young boys and girls, they were ready to have tea with the Queen of England," Norman said proudly. "The same cannot be said for many of the lawyers who come into my courtroom."

Judge Norman believes that the lack of refinement in her courtroom begins with attorneys who do not have the authority to settle even the simplest of matters.

Some attorneys, according to Norman, lack the good manners it requires to accept clients as more than just numbers. Big companies, with all their money and



their teams of lawyers, are overmatched in legal disputes with individual victims.

Judge Mary “KK” Norman presides over a full docket of cases in the Algiers Pointe Courthouse in New Orleans, including small claims and rules of possession. Her caseload ranges from disputes over fender benders to property damage claims that date back to Hurricane Katrina.

Claims Training: We Asked about Insurance Companies Specifically

“The vast majority of (insurance) cases brought into my court are settled out of court because the plaintiff (policyholder) is just one person against an army of lawyers from big insurance companies,” explained Norman. “As a judge, it can be frustrating to deal with attorneys who lack the authority to make even the simplest of decisions. I don’t think lawyers should have carte blanche on settlements, but they should be given a range in which to work.

“It’s just common courtesy.”

According to Judge Norman, there is one insurance company (who she declined to identify) that maintains its ominous reputation for not settling cases whenever there is any question of liability. Even with that company, she estimated that only 15-20 percent of the insurance cases in her courtroom actually go to trial.

Her message to claims professionals and attorneys representing insurance companies is simple: “Judges really want to help. We serve the public as well as the insurance companies. We’re all on the same team. I’d like both parties to leave my courtroom saying the decision was fair and the resolution was prompt.

“Everybody is looking for what’s fair and just for all parties. All we need to do is work together.”

Norman’s rulings are routinely based upon her insightful knowledge of the law combined with a sincere compassion of the situation faced by each party in her courtroom. As a one-time single mother

“Judges serve the public as well as the insurance companies. We’re just looking for what’s fair and just for all parties.”

— Judge Mary KK Norman

herself, Judge Norman has been able to empathize with the many single mothers coming before her in evictions court.

The judge has actually created programs that put single mothers in direct contact with the various government programs and charitable organizations available to them. She and her staff often serve as mediators to ensure the family is well cared for.

No Mother Left Behind

Judge Norman is widely recognized as never having left a single mother homeless, even in the darkest of circumstances. She recalls the case of a single mother of five children—living paycheck to paycheck—who was being evicted during the holiday season because her employer had closed its doors.

“That was simply not acceptable,” Norman declared. The judge turned to her staff and the people in the gallery of her courtroom. Before court was adjourned that day, Norman had secured an apartment for the family in exchange for chores by the woman. One observer in her courtroom donated a used refrigerator, while another offered \$750 in cash to save Christmas for the young family.

Born as Mary Kathryn (KK to her family) in the rural town of Monroe, LA north of New Orleans, Norman began her legal career as one of four women graduates in the 1970 class from the prestigious Law School at Tulane University.

Following graduation, Norman was chosen to represent Louisiana in Washington D.C. as the legal intern to Sen. Russell Long, assigned to the Senate’s Small Business Committee. Her experience in the nation’s capitol prepared her for the

responsibilities that came along with being selected the first female assistant city attorney in the municipal court of Orleans Parish.

She was elected as the first female Clerk of Second City Court in 1989. Four years later, voters in the parish selected Norman to be that court’s first female judge.

“Thirty years ago people had a hard time grasping the idea of a woman taking the space of a man at a prominent law school like Tulane,” Norman said with polite smile. “The 70s were a time of change. I am very proud and feel very lucky to have been the first woman to fill many roles that had traditionally been reserved for men.”

In spite of her numerous personal accomplishments and professional milestones, Judge Norman pronounces that her proudest role has been to serve as mother to her son Hudson and daughter Caroline.

The Judge of Love

Judge Norman was dubbed the Judge of Love by one television network because of her very romantic wedding ceremony. In 2005 she both officiated and served as mother-of-the-bride for Caroline at a ceremony held the week between Christmas and New Years.

The judge’s reputation for performing nuptials has become so famous in New Orleans that her name and the location of her courtroom are listed on the city’s official tourism web site.

“Weddings are just something that take priority in my courtroom, after we complete our regular docket,” she said with her trademark smile. “There is so much pain in this world and so much grief in this court, performing weddings helps bring everything into proper perspective and allows me to bring as much joy into this court as the law will allow.” Every newlywed couple leaves her chambers with a copy of Judge Norman’s 10 Commandments of Marriage.

The lessons in proper Southern manners she developed for her own son 20 years ago remain so popular they continue to this day.