

# SIXTH CIRCUIT— Jennifer Hodge Circuit Representative

## Summary of 2018 FJAA Educational Conference

By: Michelle Howard (Eastern District of Michigan)

Thursday, August 23, 2018 was the kick off to our 2018 Federal Judicial Assistant's Association Educational Conference. The festivities began with our opening reception atop of the flagship hotel restaurant, Cygnus 27, that was in the newly remodeled tower of the famed Amway Grand Hotel. It was on the 27th floor with spectacular views of the Grand Rapids skyline. I enjoyed meeting first-time attendees and, seeing familiar faces in the JA friends I made during my first conference. Afterwards, a group of us were still hungry and decided on a piano bar next to the hotel. That was a total blast! We were able to request some Aretha Franklin songs and sing and dance along with the piano players.



On Friday, August 24, 2018, we spent the entire day at the Gerald R. Ford Federal Building which is the courthouse for the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan. We assembled in their Jury Assembly Room for a warm welcome from our FJAA President, Lynn Magee of Minnesota and, Chief Judge Robert Jonker. He was on a family vacation in Sedona but made a special appearance by video conference. One of my favorite quotes from him, is that "it takes resources to translate judicial independence into a practical purpose... otherwise it is just a concept and it takes people like you."

In speaking with all of us, he hoped that we found a renewed sense of purpose and pride in our roles as Federal Judicial Assistants. I can confirm that I as well as my fellow J.A.s felt a sense of renewal and pride from the beginning of the day and throughout the conference. As judicial assistants, we each play an integral role in assisting our judges in making critical decisions, on and off the bench, daily. Personally, I take a great deal of pride in that and never take it for granted. It is truly an honor to serve the public through the Federal Judiciary.



Next, on the agenda was a presentation by the members of the jury department on the history of the Grand Jury and how the Western District uses them today. This was of great interest to me because I still have only limited experience with grand juries. The jury staff began with the history of grand juries being first recognized in the Magna Carta. Of course, it is the Fifth Amendment that specifically mentions what we now know as the "grand jury indictment". Federal, state and local agencies such as ATF, U.S. Postal Police, etc. can recommend a case to the grand jury. Another interesting fact I learned is that the "law of secrecy" is for life and so if you were ever involved in a grand jury proceeding, you are bound by that rule for the rest of your life. The Western District has a total of three grand juries who meet two to three times per week for a term of 18 months and they cover 49 counties.

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After the grand jury presentation, we began our journey into the fascinating case of *U.S.A. v Rami Saba* (08-cr-68). This was one of my favorite parts of the conference. First up was Michigan State Police Detective Sergeant Jackie Stasiak. Detective Stasiak took us a rollercoaster ride of a missing persons case of an eccentric man named Donald Dietz who remarkably had saved close to half a million dollars on a meager janitorial salary at Amway that turned into a (still pending) state murder investigation then into a capital murder, aggravated identity theft, mail and bank fraud case. Before this, I had no idea that the United States Secret Service is the only agency that can investigate bank fraud. I honestly thought they just were responsible with protecting the President, Vice President and other leaders and dignitaries. While presumed deceased, unfortunately, the body of Dietz was never recovered and thus Detective Stasiak's murder investigation remains open 11 years later. Determined to get some form of justice for the Dietz family, she turned the case over to the United States Attorney's Office to file federal charges against Saba and his buddy, Raogo Ouedraogo, both of whom had Ph. D's in microbiology, for capital murder, conspiracy to commit kidnapping, mail fraud, bank fraud and aggravated identity theft.

Like the San Francisco case presentation of Chinatown mobster "Shrimp Boy", we were able to hear from the actual judges presiding on the case, Magistrate Judge Phillip Green and District Court Judge Janet Neff. Also, on the panel, was former Assistant United States Attorney Russ Kavalhuna, who is now the President of Henry Ford College. One interesting fact was that AUSA Kavalhuna was under the supervision of Judge Green while he (Green) was Deputy Chief of the Criminal Division of the USAO. So together, they were able to shed a great deal of light into their strategy in presenting their case to Judge Neff. As Judge Neff put it, Green and Kavalhuna had a "purely circumstantial" case to prove because, "they had NO EVIDENCE!" (side note: Judge Neff was so funny yet so unassuming. She kept us on our toes!)

Further, she added with her unsuspecting wit, "when it landed on my desk, it was truly an 'oh crap' moment." Kavalhuna and Green argued Ouedraogo helped his friend, Saba, kidnap and kill Dietz as part of a plot to gain Dietz's \$450,000 in life savings. However, without a body, it proved difficult to tie the duo to the suspected kidnapping and murder of Dietz. Judge Neff went on to say how this case had a little bit of everything in it. There were mental competency evaluations, seven suicide attempts by Saba, the case was death penalty eligible, Saba motioned to represent himself at trial (which was granted by Neff) and the list goes on and on. At the end, they all, including Det. Stasiak, still cannot agree on what they believed happened and Stasiak is still working hard to recover Dietz's body for his family. Saba is currently serving a 32-year sentence and Ouedraogo served a 5-year sentence after appealing his original sentence for the kidnapping charge.

After the day at the courthouse, about 30, including myself, of the attendees went to a beer tasting event at New Holland Brewery. It was fitting as Grand Rapids is hailed as "Beer City U.S.A.!" The event was organized by a member of the WDMI Clerk's Office staff. I was only one of a few from EDMJ who attended so it gave me yet another opportunity to meet and connect with other JAs. I sat with two funny ladies from Minnesota, one who is currently the JA to the Chief Judge there. It was her first conference, so we quickly hit it off. Again, no matter how many miles apart, we can always find something to relate to each other in terms of our jobs.

On day 2, Saturday, August 25, we remained in the hotel ballroom for the remainder of the conference. The second day always starts with our general membership meeting where each of the officers makes a report to the organization. Then, all the new officers and circuit representatives are sworn in. Another fun thing is that a lot of us bring in gifts to raffle off, so in the morning we can check out the goodies and throw our bids in for the banquet raffle later that evening.

We had a variety of speakers come in to speak with us. The first was Henry Broitman, who is a Senior Benefits/Retirement Advisor from the AO. Usually, I think that retirement is so far down the line that I may not find it particularly useful to me now. However, I was pleasantly surprised that he had a section of his presentation dedicated to me (well those who have less than 5 years of service). Mr. Broitman motivated me to research investing more so that I can maximize the full employer match (4%) offered by the plan.

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Then, there was a representative from the AO, Dave Gustafson, who made a live presentation of all the new changes coming to JNET. I first learned of JNET when I attended the Chambers Staff Administration Workshop in D.C. in 2015 for newly hired judicial assistants and other chambers staff. I quickly fell in love with the site as it is now my go-to source. If I need to find someone quickly within the judiciary, I can look them up on people finder. If I need to answer a travel inquiry, I can quickly pull up the Guide to Judiciary Policy there. It truly is a lifesaver!

Next, Marty McDade of OSCAR discussed the new changes being made to the OSCAR site. This is where I got the idea to send out the mass emails to each candidate advising them that our term clerk position has been filled. It is a helpful feature because it automatically puts in the name of each applicant so that it is personalized, and not just a generic email. You can also set up future emails for law schools regarding available positions. Further, Mr. McDade encouraged us to provide as much information as possible on OSCAR to curtail the increase of calls from what he called “eager applicants”. Lastly, he reiterated the law clerk hiring pilot plan, which states that for the graduating class of 2021, we would not seek or accept formal or informal applications prior to June 15, 2020.

Finally, my favorite Microsoft Word trainer, Lois McLeod was back but this time with a new training module specific to our upcoming transition from IBM Lotus Notes to Outlook 2016 and she added a quick Excel refresher session. I personally prefer Outlook to Lotus Notes, because one of my favorite features is the delayed delivery of email. For example, say you wanted to send an email to someone at 10:00 p.m. but you don’t want it to show that you sent it at that time. You can schedule your email to be delivered on a specific day and time (i.e. 8:15 a.m. on September 21) Lois also said that we will have “read-only access” to our Lotus Notes email as we make the transition to Outlook. Also, while our same time IM feature is gone, we will have Skype for Business as our instant messenger. Much to the dismay of the JAs, we will not be able to have our emoji transferred. Unfortunately, emails over 80 MB and our calendar entries will not be transferred, so that is something to consider with the switch happening soon. (Josh Matta predicts at the end of the year)

Overall, the conference was educational, fun, interesting and enriching. On Saturday evening we had our annual banquet. Our president asked that we submit or share a story of triumph with the group and wear yellow as it represents positivity, clarity, energy, and optimism among other things. While I wanted to share my story of losing my dad and how my court family lifted me up (thank you!), I just couldn’t bring myself to do so. Several anonymous letters were read, and a few brave ladies stood up and poured their hearts out to us. Needless to say, we were all in tears at the end. It was truly therapeutic and uplifting and I feel that overall the conference brings a sense of renewal to all of us. I left with more memories and lots more friends from Hawaii to New York. Next year, we are headed to the Sixth Circuit again to... (drumroll please) NASHVILLE!

