

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 80

## Bollinger has it all 'in spades'

Colleagues say Macon County associate judge brings diligence, personality to bench

BY ANDREW MALONEY  
Law Bulletin staff writer

Judges are, of course, acutely sensitive to the weight of their words.

But when you mention Associate Judge Robert C. Bollinger to one of his colleagues on the 6th Judicial Circuit bench, there's no holding back.

"I can't say enough good about 'R.C.," said 6th Circuit Associate Judge Thomas E. Little, who Bollinger appeared before as an attorney. "Every characteristic you'd want to have in a judge, he's got it in spades."

A 1993 social sciences graduate of Illinois State University and a 1996 alumnus of the Southern Illinois University School of Law, Bollinger said he always wanted to be an attorney.

But he didn't think about a judgeship until a spot on the central Illinois-based 6th Circuit opened up a few years ago.

"I went to Washington, D.C., with my family, vacationing, and found out there was a vacancy for associate judge," the 42-year-old Bollinger said. "The more I learned about it, the more I started to think of it as something I'd really be interested in."

From there, he rattles off some details about the application process:

- From the grueling phases of personal information accrual — "It was pretty comprehensive ... they wanted the lawyers you'd practiced with, other judges you'd appeared with, how many trials you'd been in, how many appellate court arguments ... it took some time to gather up all that information."

- To the competition — "I believe there were 14 other applicants — that's going by memory."

- To the special notice he received when he was offered the position — "I was very honored to find out ... I had received a letter from (Illinois Supreme Court) Justice Rita Garman, congratulating me."

But while not every detail leading up to his appointment has stuck in his mind, Bollinger said after he got on the bench, at least one case has — *Decatur Police Benevolent and Protective Association Labor Committee v. The City of Decatur*.

In that instance, a federal arbitrator ruled that a Decatur police officer accused of domestic battery and lying to investigators was wrongly dismissed from the force, but the city challenged the decision in Macon County Circuit Court.

"I'd never had a case dealing with someone trying to overturn an arbitrator, and so the law was very unfamiliar to me," Bollinger said. "There really was no law directly on point that dealt with this particular issue — (there were some) generally on point, but nothing dealing with the facts of this case."

So Bollinger reviewed state laws outside Illinois, and eventually issued a lengthy opinion that stated, in essence, that the arbitrator had ruled incorrectly.

"It undermines the public confidence in police departments by requiring the continued employment of officers who fail to tell the truth during investigations surrounding their own conduct," he wrote, "yet expecting that others facing such investigation will be truthful."

That section was cited by the 4th District Appellate Court in its decision last year affirming Bollinger's ruling.

"In that opinion, the appellate court was very complimentary," he said. "Based on the comments, I



Robert C. Bollinger

Associate Judge, 6th Judicial Circuit

- **Appointed:** 2008
- **Career:** Private practice, Erickson, Davis, Murphy, Johnson & Walsh Ltd. in Decatur, 1996-2008
- **Age:** 42
- **Law school:** Southern Illinois University College of Law, 1996
- **Interests:** Spending time with family, working out, playing basketball, teaching

thought they found it to be helpful."

It's that sort of diligence that colleagues say typifies Bollinger.

Evan H. Johnson, a partner at Erickson, Davis, Murphy, Johnson & Walsh Ltd. in Decatur — where Bollinger worked before becoming a judge — said he was "always looking for the correct solution" and described his work ethic as such that "if he's done with his work for the day, he's checking to see if others need help."

Additionally, Johnson said, there's a magnetic quality to Bollinger's personality that made him not only an intellectual asset to the firm, but a financial asset as well.

"He was a hell of a business-getter," he said. "So we were disappointed greatly when he left. He attracted clients — and they just kept coming back."

Since joining the bench, Bollinger has frequently tackled traffic and juvenile delinquency cases —

the latter he describes as "frustrating, interesting and rewarding at the same time."

"The law is structured quite differently, and you know, basically before you'd ever commit a minor to the juvenile department of corrections, an effort has to be made," Bollinger said. "If they can receive community-based services, that should be attempted before removing children from the home."

Broadly, he said, if the justice system can help link troubled kids to therapists or other community and home-intervention services when the earliest signs of delinquency begin to show, they can go on to lead productive lives.

Like applying pressure to a fresh wound, "for the most part, it seems to me to be pretty effective," Bollinger said. "Once we've implemented those services at the early stages, the kids have benefited from that."

When he's not working, Bollinger is a family man — he has a wife and four kids, ranging in age from 1 to 14.

But even when he's not donning his robes, Bollinger doesn't like to stray too far from the court.

"I do like to go work out — I play basketball," he said. "At 42, I'm probably less and less competitive than I used to be. But it's good cardio."

Additionally, Bollinger teaches a once-a-week course in law and ethics that is part of a health information technology program at Richland Community College in Decatur.

This is his first year teaching, and he said one of the most fulfilling parts of the job is seeing the effort put forth by students who may simultaneously be working full-time jobs.

"I like that aspect," he said. "People are trying to improve themselves and their positions in life. That's rewarding to me."

And teaching may very well be a natural fit for someone who's already accustomed to influencing lives with his words.

However, Bollinger admitted that he'd forgotten to issue at least one important verbal directive to his students already.

"Usually, they call me 'Judge Bollinger,' or they just don't call me anything," he said, laughing. "I probably made the mistake at the beginning by not telling them what to call me."

amaloney@lbpc.com