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A TRIBUTE TO THE HONORABLE HELEN MEYER

Eric S. Janus†

When Justice Helen Meyer stepped off the Minnesota Supreme Court last year, the court lost a distinctive and valuable voice. But her vision for our justice system and our society will continue. She leaves a legacy that will improve the lives of children for generations to come.

Appointed to the supreme court by Governor Jesse Ventura in 2003, Helen Meyer brought a new perspective to that tribunal. As a trained social worker, she had worked with youth in locked psychiatric wards, seeing firsthand the effects of abuse, neglect, and chemical dependency, and the importance of appropriate interventions. Years later, Chief Justice Lorie Gildea would observe, “She worked with people who will never be in more need of the commitment and strength of a wise, resourceful advocate, and she answered that call.”1 But the social work role was not enough, so she turned to law. Like many, she went to law school to help others, but her training and experience sharpened her motivation: she studied law so she could advocate for abused and neglected kids.

Her career took a slightly different turn, as she developed a successful practice and widespread respect in the legal profession as a plaintiffs’ personal injury lawyer. Her formula for success was straightforward. The foundation was technical expertise. When the editors of the Minnesota Motor Vehicle Accident Deskbook wanted a chapter on the technical questions about how cases were handled when more than one person was responsible for causing an accident, they turned to Helen. Her chapter was technically spot-on. As important, it was written in a clear and accessible manner. It was, in short, not just good, but practical and good.

Helen was certified as a civil trial specialist by the National Board of Trial Advocacy and the Minnesota State Bar Association.

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Her peers considered her advocacy skills on a par with the best, and she was often asked to share her expertise at CLEs. Once, Helen shared the stage with a former client at a program sponsored by the Trial Lawyers Association (before it became the Association for Justice). The topic was “preparing for trial.” The client described the relationship she had had with Helen as they worked their way through a jury trial. Mike Fargione, himself a preeminent personal injury lawyer, describes the client’s presentation this way:

The client talked about the things Helen had done to reduce her anxiety and how she had worked with her through each stage of preparation. She talked about how supportive Helen had been during what was the most difficult time she had faced in her life, between recovering from the injury and going through the stresses of litigation. The bond with the client was obvious.

But here’s the punch line: the jury had gone against the client. Fargione’s comment: “It’s difficult enough to make clients happy when you win. I’ve never seen a person give such a ringing endorsement of an attorney after going through the ordeal of a trial that had been unsuccessful.”

Helen built a successful career. Twenty years in, the Governor recognized her unique blend of talent and character. “Helen has taken risks in her career,” then-Governor Jesse Ventura said in announcing her appointment at the Capitol Rotunda in St. Paul. “She built her own law firm. She has served on law-related committees and has tackled tough and sometimes unpopular issues in her profession and worked to see them through.” But he also saw in Helen the enduring lessons she learned as a child growing up on a dairy farm in central Minnesota. “Helen also relates well to the common person,” he remarked, predicting, “[i]n writing her opinions, Helen will make sure they make sense to everyone.”

On the supreme court, Justice Meyer authored 146 majority opinions on a range of topics. Her opinion in *State v. Ramey* has been cited over 575 times. The case established a new legal standard when determining whether unobjected-to prosecutorial
misconduct is prejudicial. Discussing the plain error doctrine, Justice Meyer wrote, “[W]hen prosecutorial misconduct reaches the level of plain or obvious error—conduct the prosecutor should know is improper—the prosecution should bear the burden of demonstrating that its misconduct did not prejudice the defendant’s substantial rights.”

At the celebration marking Justice Meyer’s retirement from the court in 2012, Chief Justice Lorie Gildea praised her “voice, vision and victory.” Through her entire career, Helen Meyer has made sure that the voices of some of the most vulnerable in our society are heard. Think about the lives she has touched directly, or through the force of her resolve and her mind.

... During her decade with us on the court, Justice Helen Meyer continued to make sure that the voices of some of the most vulnerable in our justice system were heard and were protected. She did this through her leadership of the Children’s Justice Initiative and through her service as the Chair of the Supreme Court’s Chemical Dependency Task Force.

When she announced her resignation from the court in 2012, Justice Meyer made it clear that she was not finished with public service. Through her persistent and grounded advocacy, she persuaded us at Mitchell of the benefits of a Child Protection Clinic, which she supported philanthropically and as Chair of the Advisory Board. Her vision for the clinic exhibited a boldness and nuance developed over a lifetime of advocacy in the real world. How, she asked, are child-protection courts most likely to achieve results that advance the best interests of the abused or neglected child? Received wisdom holds that vigorous advocacy for the child is the key. But Helen’s experience told her that the route to better outcomes for kids lies in the quality of advocacy for the parents. A less experienced and nuanced view might find this counterintuitive: the juvenile system, after all, seems to pit the interests of children against those of their parents. But Helen’s years of training, her work in and on the courts, showed her that strong parental advocacy would afford parents a stronger chance of getting the services—and making the changes—they need to be

5. Id. at 299–300.
good parents to their kids. It reflected an insight she had had years before, as a social worker, working with the most vulnerable kids: that what they often most wanted was to get back with their parents, even those who had abused or neglected them. And, she knew that, with proper services, the best outcome is often reuniting the family.

Helen’s vision for children, and for her alma mater, extends further into the future. The idea of the Child Protection Clinic is not simply to provide services to parents, but also to train law students—future lawyers—to provide effective representation; not just to pass along the received wisdom, but to develop and disseminate best practices.

Helen and her husband, Bill Bieber, took Helen’s vision a huge step further and endowed the Justice Helen M. Meyer Chair in Child Protection at William Mitchell College of Law, perhaps the only such chair at a law school in this country. For Helen, the permanent endowment amounted to the establishment of a “constitutional right” to have child protection be addressed in a serious way at her law school in perpetuity. This, for her, was a moment of happiness. This is not a case of happiness producing philanthropy; rather, philanthropy facilitating happiness.

From a childhood on a dairy farm in central Minnesota, to a social worker, lawyer, supreme court justice, philanthropist, and educator, Helen Meyer has worked to make the world a better place for children, now and in the future.

This is truly Helen Meyer’s legacy.