Chief Justice Popovich—A Tribute

A. M. Keith
CHIEF JUSTICE POPOVICH—A TRIBUTE

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Peter S. Popovich has left his imprint on the Minnesota judicial system through his efforts as the first Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals and his service on the Supreme Court as Associate Justice and Chief Justice. Though he has made significant contributions as a legislator and as an attorney specializing in education law, I want to reflect on his commitment to improving the administration of justice. His judicial career demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, judges can be administrators.

As the first Chief Judge of the Minnesota Court of Appeals, Peter Popovich had the unique opportunity to structure an intermediate appellate court. Consistent with his work habits, he read all the literature on the subject, attended seminars, and consulted with judges and administrative experts from around the country. When the Court of Appeals began operation in 1983, Chief Judge Popovich and five colleagues had in place policies and procedures that enabled the court to immediately take charge of its case load. The new court had the foresight to automate the processing of case files, harnessing the power of the computer to insure that cases never fell through the cracks. This aggressive method of case management allowed the Court of Appeals to become a model for intermediate courts in this country, and the court received national awards in recognition of these accomplishments.

Justice Popovich brought these management skills to the Supreme Court in 1987. He studied the practices and procedures of the state’s highest court and was ready to apply the lessons he had learned when he assumed the office of Chief Justice in 1989. During his tenure as Chief Justice, he worked closely with the Court to insure that cases received a prompt hearing.

Chief Justice Popovich’s commitment to case management was not confined to the appellate courts. He worked with the

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Conference of Chief Judges to improve the administration of the district courts. Through his leadership, the ten judicial districts began developing case management plans and education programs to expedite the disposition of cases.

His focus on judicial administration was also applied to an area often overlooked by attorneys and judges, court rules. As supreme court liaison to the Standing Committee on the Rules of Criminal Procedure, Chief Justice Popovich was a moving force. His energetic leadership contributed to significant amendments that were adopted in 1989. Likewise, as Chair of the Supreme Court Task Force on Uniform Local Rules, he guided a large and diverse group of judges, attorneys, and court administrators through a review of all local trial court rules. The Task Force recommendations, which are currently under consideration by the Supreme Court, constitute a major effort to provide uniformity and consistency in the practice of law in the trial courts.

In these and other areas, Chief Justice Popovich has demonstrated a commitment to improving the administration of justice. His determination that the system can always do better produced results that are a model for other courts. He has set in motion ideas and practices that will continue to serve the legal system well.