

In Small Claims Court, he is the face of justice

By Steve Lopez, January 18, 2009

A letter arrived last fall informing me that I had been sued. I was instructed to go to Small Claims Court in downtown Los Angeles and face my accuser.

The courtroom was crammed, the hallway buzzing with spillover grievances. Inside, I watched with amazement as Commissioner Robert Harrison calmly and graciously began sorting out L.A.'s problems -- auto repair disputes, security deposit disagreements and handshake business deals gone bad.

It was one mess after another, the plaintiffs and defendants armed with stacks of photos, scratch-paper notes and photocopied documents, all of it for Harrison to make sense of in five or 10 minutes. Litigants jabbered away at him or one another, only occasionally in English, and I wondered if Harrison had to sedate himself to make it through a day.

Two hours passed before my case was called. A woman had come to a book signing of mine last year and insisted that I look at some of her decades-old stories and photos to see if they could be published. I later FedExed them back, but she claimed they never arrived, and she wanted \$5,000 from me.

I felt a little nervous at the defendant podium, putting my fate in Harrison's hands. It helped that I had records showing the delivery had been made. Harrison doesn't always rule immediately. Sometimes you get his decision in the mail a couple of weeks later. That's how I found out he had denied the woman's \$5,000 claim.

But after my case was decided, I wanted to know more about how the guy manages to muddle through 50 to 80 cases a day with a smile on his face and a kind greeting for the masses who stand before him with their beefs. About 75,000 small claims cases are filed each year in L.A. County, and nobody handles more of them than Harrison, who became a commissioner in 2006 after 25 years as an attorney and gets along well enough in Spanish, Italian, French and German but surrenders all hope with Armenian.

"I've lived an advantaged life," Harrison said to explain why he willingly throws himself into the middle of an endless daily scrum. The son of an accountant and homemaker, he was born in Pacoima but raised in Beverly Hills. He went to UCLA and then Loyola Law School, and said he did a fair share of pro bono legal work as part of paying back his good fortune.

"This seemed like a nice, natural next step to expand my public service," he said, telling me he loves the job.

All right, but doesn't he still get the urge, six times a day, to throttle people who tie up court time, on the taxpayers' dime, with differences that are either too petty or could be worked out privately?

"He never loses it," Lynell Pearson, his clerk, said as if she were under oath.

"Well," Harrison argued, "sometimes I do have to say to people, 'Look, I think you're lying.' "

But there's no Judge Judy or Judge Wapner nonsense, he said. He's got no gavel to rap and he's not adversarial for dramatic effect, although he estimates 25% of the claims should never have been filed. He often encourages litigants to sort things out in the hallway. He says he's got a constant problem in people who watch TV court dramas and swagger in, thinking bombast and lawyerly lingo will win the day.

But his goal, Harrison said, is to treat everyone with respect and compassion and to let them know he will try his best to give them a fair hearing.

"I'm what the face of justice looks like to many people."

That's Robert, said his mother, Estelle, and he's been that way since he was a mere lad. Maybe it's a middle-child thing, said his sister, Kathy, a school psychologist who said Robert is the second of three boys.

"He's always been kind of a peacemaker," said his brother and ex-law partner, Michael. "We grew up in a family of four kids talking simultaneously at the dinner table, so he's used to heated arguments."

But aren't some of the cases a little preposterous, or impossible to rule on?

"We do have a full-moon problem," Harrison said, noting that there seems to be a lunar rhythm to the weirdness. Pearson recalled a case, when she worked for a different commissioner, in which the plaintiff sued Greyhound, arguing she had bought a bus ticket to Hawaii but never made it to the island. She also recalls a plaintiff lugging a sewing machine into court as an exhibit.

And Harrison once had "someone suing over a dry-cleaning bill of \$10 or thereabouts. Preposterous? I don't necessarily think so."

"Yes, it is," I said. "I'm overruling you."

From his perch on the bench, Harrison is witness to an ever-changing L.A. narrative. Lately, he said, he's been getting a lot of claims by downtown

residents who bought lofts while buildings were being converted, only to find out the completed unit didn't match what was in the brochure. He also gets lots of merchants suing over film shoots that drive customers away, and he knows apartment rental rates have soared, just by all the security deposit disputes in the \$4,000 range.

"What's exciting for me is that I get to see a window into many communities," he said, telling me about the mutual loan organizations in Koreatown.

Ten people agree to each put \$200 into a pot every month, and a different one of the 10 gets \$2,000 at the end of each month. That way they can make a down payment on a car, buy restaurant equipment or whatever. When someone misses a payment or drops out, the others sometimes file in Small Claims Court.

Harrison has also seen disputes over a 17th century Italian handshake agreement, known as a tontine, in which several parties agree that the last of them who's alive will get all the others' assets. And as a Jew, he was surprised by a rare dispute that came out of a Beit Din, an arbitration system overseen by a rabbi in the Orthodox Jewish community.

Last Monday, Harrison had more than 30 cases in the morning and three dozen more in the afternoon. In between, he admitted it might have helped that he worked as a psychiatric aide at a hospital before becoming a lawyer. Harrison, who's openly gay, said it might also have helped that he's spent decades leading group discussions at the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center in Hollywood, helping people deal with coming-out or other issues.

"I think I've got a lesbian coming-out group tonight," he said at lunch.

When he returned to court, every seat was taken, the relentless tide of contention lapping against the pews in Department 92, Room 543. Harrison heard a landlord-tenant dispute over a dirty carpet and broken windows, and he got a woman who bought a lemon of a car from a dealer who wouldn't enforce a warranty set up with a bootleg third party.

A contentious little quarrel over a residential curtain and drapery contract utterly fascinated him. The installer said she wasn't paid; the homeowner said the job was botched.

"Oh, so you wanted an arched effect," Harrison said, examining photos and well on his way to mastering the minutiae of yet another gnarly entanglement.

When the homeowner claimed a box frame was not as wide as the shade it was for, the indignant installer asked what room she was talking about.

"The guest bedroom," Harrison said without looking up from the stacks of photos and documents.

"Do you swear to God?" the installer asked indignantly, turning to face the homeowner.

"I swear to God," the homeowner shot back.

Before the afternoon session had begun, Pearson was asked by a waiting plaintiff if he could have his case heard by a judge instead of a commissioner.

Judges are generally elected and commissioners hired at roughly 85% the pay.

"Yes, you can," said Pearson, who has worked for four commissioners in 15 years. "But my recommendation? This is one of the best commissioners I've ever worked with."

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