

Linda Griffin to Retire After 15 Years on Family Court

When Rensselaer County Family Court Judge Linda Griffin began her first term on the bench in 1994, the court was situated in an annex at Congress and Third streets, not the larger, ornate courthouse it is in today a few blocks away. Things were a lot different then, she said.

Her courtroom had no computer, no photocopier and not even a telephone.

She is about to retire on March 31 from a Family Court that is now much more efficient, not just in terms of technology—though now she has access to a variety of records right at the bench—but in how it serves families.

“I’ve tried to be an innovator and collaborator,” Griffin said. “We have a lot of services in place for people now that we didn’t have 15 years ago. I think we have wonderful working relationships with county agencies and community service organizations.”

Helping families is what the Court is all about, she said, and it requires more than a ruling at the bench. It requires reaching out to get people what they need, and she will be remembered by many for doing just that.

“For all the time that she’s been on the bench, she’s just never lost her compassion and her encouragement for people,” said Katherine Maciol, Rensselaer County’s mental health commissioner.

She called Griffin a “team player” and an innovator.

“She’s always willing to come to the table around planning new programming,” Maciol said.

One program Griffin brought to the court was a treatment program to help parents deal with addiction problems, and Maciol said the judge would sometimes have tear up as she watched people graduate from the program.

County Executive Kathy Jimino said the program improved families by getting parents back on track.

“They could get the help that they needed so that they could be the good parents that they wanted to be, and the good parents that everyone wanted them to be,” she said.

Griffin, a Stephentown resident and Albany Law School graduate, said the network of possibilities that developed for people over the years is what she will remember, and she said they are necessary to end cycles of problems that bring the same families in again and again.

“If we don’t try to hook people up with services, they’re going to be here again in another three months, because it never ends,” she said.

Much of Family Court deals with children — sometimes in heart-wrenching fashion — and before sitting on the bench she spent almost a decade as a court-appointed law guardian,

tasked with representing children.

“Her primary goal was always to see that the best interest of the children or child were protected,” said Richard Hanft, an attorney who has practiced both with her when she was an attorney and before her once she became a judge. Jimino said Griffin was successful in securing positive outcomes in a court that sometimes can showcase painful situations.

“She worked very hard to make sure that the families had the best possible outcome in her courtroom,” she said. “She poured her heart and soul into what she did everyday, and that will certainly be missed.”

Griffin’s career contains numerous honors, a solid re-election to a second 10-year term, and one blemish: a 2008 censure by the Commission on Judicial Conduct for a failing to follow proper procedure in holding three people in contempt. It’s something she wishes hadn’t happened. Otherwise, having heard at least 30,000 cases, she said she has no regrets and looks forward to spending time with her family, especially a young grandson.

“I have a lot of plans,” she said. “My husband and I want to travel — lots of other things that I’ve put on a back burner for a long time.”

The busy court will have only one judge, Catherine Cholakis, until Gov. David Paterson announces a replacement for Griffin. That person must be confirmed by the state Senate before taking the office and running in a special election in November.