



NEWS RELEASE

SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA • COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

San Diego Superior Court Judge Harry Elias Retires

December 31, 2020 – Judge Harry M. Elias will officially retire from San Diego Superior Court on January 3, 2021, just days after celebrating his 30th anniversary on the bench.

Judge Elias completed his judicial career where he began it, in the North County Regional Center where he presided over civil and criminal trials, hearings and case settlements for 30 years. First serving on the North County Municipal Court, where he served as the Presiding Judge in 1994-1995, Judge Elias was elevated to the Superior Court during the municipal and superior courts consolidation in 1998. With the invaluable help of his courtroom clerk of 22 years, Susan Smith, he has spent the last nine months conducting nonstop virtual hearings to help keep the criminal justice process moving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both as a prosecutor and as a judge, a primary focus of Judge Elias' career was the adjudication of serious criminal cases and he has presided over numerous homicide and sexual assault trials. Eight years ago he found some balance from the harsh realities of criminal court by serving as the judge who handled all of the adoption cases in North County. His oversight of adoptions and criminal matters converged when an individual whose adoption he officiated later served as a juror in one of his criminal cases. In another crossover, Judge Elias sentenced a defendant in a criminal case to prison, but was thrilled to see him again years later when the man successfully completed parole, recovered from addiction, and appeared in Judge Elias' courtroom as an adoptive parent.

For much of his career, Judge Elias has had a particular interest in the safety and well-being of children and other vulnerable populations. For eight years, he presided in a Juvenile Dependency Court assignment where he handled cases concerning children removed from parents or caretakers due to allegations of child maltreatment. Before his appointment to the bench, he was a prosecutor in the San Diego District Attorney's office from 1976-1990. In 1985, he was appointed as the first Chief of the newly-formed Family Protection Division, which prosecuted cases involving child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, child sexual assault and child abduction. His unit, which worked closely with the Child Protection Center at San Diego Children's Hospital, became known for its innovative advances in interdisciplinary coordination and child-friendly approaches to cases involving child victims. The unit received a federal grant which helped to establish it as one of the early models for specialized handling of these difficult cases.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed my time as a judge, and have worked with terrific colleagues who have helped me throughout my career,” said Judge Elias. “I am also grateful to the scores of excellent attorneys who have appeared before me, and who brought knowledge of new and different areas of the law. It’s been a great opportunity to both learn and help people.”

Judge Elias has been involved in numerous pioneering activities beyond the courtroom on behalf of abused children and women. In 1999, Judge Elias was appointed by the Governor’s office to the Children’s Justice Act Task Force for the State of California, which assists in determining federal funding priorities for child abuse programs. He has served as its chairman for nearly 20 years. He is also a member of the Judicial Council of California’s Violence Against Women Education Project (VAWEP). He is a life member of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), the first national, interdisciplinary organization to address the issue of child maltreatment. He served as a member of the Board of Directors and was elected APSAC’s President in 1997-98. In 2003, in a collaboration between APSAC and the University of Dundee, Scotland, Judge Elias helped to develop and teach a week-long course on Advanced Forensic Interviewing of Child Witnesses. This course, which took place in Dundee and included an international faculty, was so successful it maintained a waiting list attendance for over a decade, at which point it was adopted by and made mandatory training by the Scottish Police College. Judge Elias’ time teaching in Scotland, with the many golf courses nearby, contributed significantly to his devotion to all things Scottish. His father-in-law, who was born and raised in Scotland, bequeathed his kilts to Judge Elias who still wears them when the right occasion arises.

In service to fellow judicial officers, Judge Elias was a faculty member of the Judicial Council of California’s Center for Judicial Education and Research. For several years, he has taught the 40-hour New Judge Orientation course and recently, helped to re-write the curriculum to be delivered remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He has also been a CJER instructor on Sexual Assault Cases, Judicial Ethics and Juvenile Dependency. Some of Judge Elias’ other professional memberships include the Association of Juvenile Court Judges of California, and the California Judges Association, where he previously chaired the Criminal Law & Procedure Committee.

“Judge Elias’ knowledge of the law, his ability to manage a heavy calendar and his incredible work ethic are irreplaceable,” said San Diego Superior Court Presiding Judge Lorna Alksne. “While San Diego is losing a dedicated jurist, I am pleased to announce that Judge Elias will continue to serve the State of California through the statewide Assigned Judge Program where he could be assigned to sit in any county, including San Diego, on a temporary basis due to a court’s needs.”

Judge Elias is dedicated to sharing his knowledge and experience on many aspects of the law, on how the justice system works, and on what it can and cannot accomplish. He is a respected speaker and enthusiastic trainer who receives rave reviews, and who has enjoyed informing others through hundreds of workshops, panels, and addresses at conferences throughout the United States and internationally.

Harry Elias earned his B.A. from the University of Michigan, and his law degree from the University of San Diego. He was a Michigan letterman and is an avid U of M football fan; known for his innumerable blue & maize ties and outfits worn under his robes every Friday before a game. He likes to say he's the only judge who has both Bo Shembechler and Jim Harbaugh bobbleheads on the shelf behind his bench.

In retirement, Judge Elias plans to spend time with his wife traveling and visiting his children and young grandchildren, who he has not seen in over a year due to the pandemic. He hopes to come back on occasion as a Temporary Assigned Judge, and hopes, even more, to become a temporary player on each of the three small golf clubs in Scotland, where he is a member.

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