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Keeping Order in the Court



By Dave Meany

When John Mueller was just a junior at Eastern Washington University, the government major decided there was no time like the present to test his passion for civic duty. So Mueller ('78 BA government) ran for the Spokane City Council.

"As I was getting into my classes at Eastern, I was keeping track of city government in Spokane, and not being too happy with the way things were going, I decided to throw my hat into the ring," says Mueller.

Mueller didn't fare so well. "There were five of us in the race. I came in fourth." But he gained valuable experience as he "learned a lot about myself and interacting with people."

Now, 30 years later, you might say the verdict is in – Mueller's venture into government has actually been a huge success. For more than 17 years, he has been the "bailiff" for Judge Sam Cozza. Mueller started with the judge in Spokane County District Court, and followed him to Superior Court in 1996 when Cozza was elected to an open seat.

In reality, bailiff is somewhat of an outdated term, as Mueller isn't responsible for handcuffing defendants and escorting them to and from jail, like it was at one time.

Maybe that's a good thing, as Mueller recalls one incident from his early days in district court when a defendant bolted from the room before Mueller could secure the handcuffs.

"I was about a foot away from grabbing him, and he made a quick turn to the right and high-hurdled the railing and jumped down like a cat and sprung up and took off," Mueller recounts. Mueller didn't give chase. Instead, common sense prevailed and he let the police track down the suspect that same day. When the defendant was back before the court, this time in a secure jail video courtroom, Mueller simply said, "Welcome back."

It's that friendly demeanor that allows Mueller, whose official title is judicial assistant, to coordinate the judge's daily routine while delicately juggling the needs of attorneys, the media and most importantly, a jury during a trial. Mueller's primary challenge with a jury is to make sure they don't talk about a case outside of deliberations, and he learned long ago to not even try to predict what a jury will do. "I used to be able to predict in my own mind which way they were going to go, and once my track record didn't look so good, I quit doing it."

One thing Mueller hasn't given up is his pride in EWU, especially when he realized how his degree in government and minor in communications helped him on the job. "I had a wonderful experience at Eastern, especially in my government and communication degrees," he says.

While his government classes taught him to respectfully look at both sides of an issue, Mueller credits his communications classes with helping him the most.

"Those skills have taught me how to be able to express myself to various individuals (the public, attorneys, media) in the court system without getting upset or irritated," says Mueller.



But the real display of Mueller's Eagle pride is in his office, which is hard to miss. His door is covered with colorful Eastern Eagles posters, including the one from Rodney Stuckey's final year. Inside, all things Eastern can be found on the walls, including pocket calendars and autographed team photos. Mueller's favorite memento – a Stuckey autographed basketball – stays at home.

Still, his office decor isn't just about pride. As Mueller sees it, it's about restoring order in the court.

"The majority of people I work with in the county are Gonzaga fans, and it's important for me as an Eastern alum to portray Eastern in the best way that I know how," says Mueller. "And this reflects who I am, where I went to school and I'm proud."

Now comfortable within the confines of Cozza's court, Mueller ponders a question about whether he'd ever consider another run at office, just like the one he made as a youthful, bright student back in his Eastern days.

"At times, but then I look at what I've got here with the judge and it's kind of hard. The bug's still there – never say never."

You might say the jury is still out. **E**