



Judge Norm Fenton
in a Tucson courtroom.

BY MIRA RADOVICH
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MERTZ

Judging FOR Youth

In 1992, Judge Norman S. Fenton retired after serving 25 years as an Arizona Superior Court judge in Tucson. He had devoted his entire working life to the court system, so it was only natural that he wanted to continue his involvement in the legal community on some level. At the same time, massive riots were breaking out in Los Angeles after four white L.A. police officers were acquitted of assaulting black motorist Rodney King.

The ensuing controversy surrounding the riots provoked Fenton to action. While the Rodney King case exposed the flaws in the Los Angeles police force and civic leadership, Fenton desired to show that the legal system could be fair. That desire led to the formation of Courts Are Us, a youth employment program aimed at educating high school students about the legal system.



Judge Wendy Morton sought to help youth who had to appear in court.

“I founded Courts Are Us because I wanted to show how real courts are good places run by hard-working people who believe in justice,” says Fenton. “I wanted young people to have the opportunity that very few people get—to see the inner workings of the court system and get paid for it.”

Courts Are Us, now in its 11th year, is a partnership between Tucson’s court system and Tucson Youth Development, a non-profit organization that serves at-risk teens by providing an alternative educational program and technical training.

Tucson Youth Development screens applications from high school students for the seven-week program that runs each summer. Approximately 30 students are chosen to take part in Courts Are Us, and they are assigned mostly clerical jobs within the court system. In the past, students have worked at the Pima County Superior Court, the Pima County Attorney’s Office and Legal Defender’s Office, and the Tucson City Court.

Students who apply must meet certain income requirements. Kathleen Bibby, executive director of Tucson Youth Development, says that most students participating in the program are qualified through the national Workforce Investment Act.

Fifteen-year-old Andreina Rios, a student at Cienega High School in Tucson, participated in Courts Are Us this summer; she worked in the Research and Statistics Office of the Pima County Superior Court. Rios researched online case files for her department. She says the best part of her job was working with fun people.

“It’s a good job to have,” Rios says. “I now know the real behind-the-scenes workings of the court, instead of the stereotype you see on TV. You don’t get to see that working in a mall.”

Another Courts Are Us participant is Ramon Olivas, a 15-year-old Tucson High School student who worked at Tucson City Court in the Public Services Department; he spent time filing and organizing traffic citations. Olivas says one challenge of his job was trying to decipher the illegible handwriting of some police officers.

“The only other bad part was the paper cuts!” says Olivas.

Every student participating in the program is assigned a supervisor at his or her job site. Also assigned are attorney mentors to provide insight on their professional experiences.

This year, attorney Carl A. Piccarreta served as lead mentor for the program, and he recruited almost three dozen Tucson-area lawyers to serve as mentors. They included Pima County Superior Court Judge Paul Tang and Pima County Juvenile Court Judge Hector Campoy. In addition, Judge Frank Dawley, Pima County Superior Court, presided over a mock trial, and Judge Peter Eckerstrom, Court of Appeals Division Two, served as the program’s graduation speaker.

Monte Clausen, a United States Attorney in Tucson, has served as a mentor for the Courts Are Us program for eight years.

“I got involved because I love kids and enjoy working with them,” Clausen says. “You meet really interesting students and get to know them on a one-on-one basis.”

As a mentor, Clausen brings students to his office to show them how attorneys spend their days. He also takes them on tours of Tucson court buildings.

“The highlight is going to the U.S. Marshal’s Service Office,” Clausen says. “The kids are always very interested in seeing the detention facilities.”

He adds, “Courts Are Us is a great way to expose kids to the court system. It’s an educational environment for the kids and an enriching experience for the lawyers. You get a lot of satisfaction from a minimal time commitment.”

“Judge Fenton had done a remarkable job with the Courts Are Us program,” says Clausen. “He truly has a heart for the young.”



A Court Story

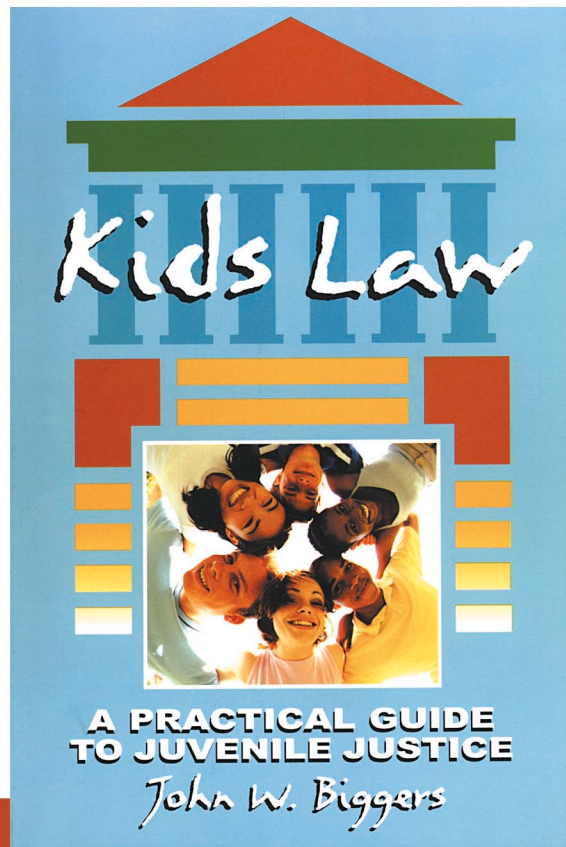
Another judge interested in working with children is Wendy Morton of the Office of Administrative Hearing in Phoenix. In 1996, Morton created “Court Story,” a coloring book for children that helps prepare them for the court experience.

At the time, Morton was working as a prosecutor in the juvenile division of the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office, specializing in sex crimes. She often encountered young children—many of whom were crime victims—who had to appear in court.

Morton wanted to do something to make the children more comfortable and help them understand what happens in a courtroom. One day as she drove to work with colleagues, she passed the Great Arizona Puppet Theater, and inspiration struck. She decided to create a children’s story using a cast of animal puppets.

“I bought some puppets, re-dressed some puppets and even made some puppets, which was interesting because I don’t sew,” says Morton.

Using the puppet characters, she wrote and illustrated a col-



A Practical Approach to Kids Law

Tucson attorney John W. Biggers has written *Kids Law: A Practical Guide to Juvenile Justice*. It is intended as a resource for parents, teachers, counselors and those who live and work with young people and who want to know more about the juvenile justice system.

Kids Law deals the practical aspects of helping children who are facing or might have some involvement with the law. The book explains legal issues facing youth today and details the elements of a criminal case, from crime to court appearance to final disposition of the case.

Biggers also describes situations in which children are caught up in the legal system due to the actions of the adults in their lives. These are mostly civil law matters such as divorce and custody, and education and employment issues.

In 2004, the *Kids Law* Teacher's Manual was published as a companion to the volume. It is designed for middle and high school teachers dealing with juvenile justice, social studies, civics and law-related education classes. The manual was written by Debra Cunningham, the magnet lead teacher for Cholla High Magnet School in Tucson. The lessons found in the manual are designed to fit into 50- to 55-minute classroom periods, but they can be adjusted to different schedules. Also included in the manual are handouts and quizzes that accompany material found in *Kids Law*.

For more information on using *Kids Law* in the classroom, contact John Biggers at johnbiggers@earthlink.net or see www.kidslaw.com.

oring book that depicts how a witness reports a crime to the police and then recounts the facts in a courtroom before a judge.

The main character, Percy the Pig, is walking to school when he sees two cars bump into each other. Percy describes the incident to Officer McRaffe, a giraffe. Later Percy goes to court with his mother and recounts the story for lawyers Harry Fuzz and Maggie Moppet. All the court proceedings take place under the watchful eye of Judge Owly Vandehoot.

“I approached the story from a legal standpoint and made sure it was not suggestive,” Morton says. She also had several colleagues, including victim advocates and a psychologist, review the book to ensure it presented a neutral, nonleading scenario and appropriate language for children.

“For victims who are young, the courtroom experience can be scary because it is an unfamiliar environment,” says Morton. “I wanted to find a way to make the process of going to court as easy as possible for the children.”

The Maricopa County Superior Court Interpreter’s Office translated “Court Story” into Spanish, which was one of Morton’s goals for the project. The other goal was to make the book available at no cost to those who needed it.

Private donations helped pay for the book’s first print run. The second run was sponsored by the Arizona Division of Children and Family Services. Costs for the book’s third edition, which was printed in June 2004, were split between Morton and the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education.

The Foundation makes the book available to teachers, school resource officers, lawyers and court personnel to use as an educational tool in the classroom.

“I always knew that when I started my career I would have a dual role,” says Morton. “I want to be involved in my work and involved in my community to help young people learn about the law and the roles of lawyers.”

For more information or to obtain copies of “Court Story,” contact Jeff Schrade, Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education, at 602-340-7268. 