

A Rising Star In The Windy City: Judge Amy St. Eve

By **Gavin Broady**



Law360, New York (June 03, 2014, 8:02 PM ET) -- Those who know Judge Amy St. Eve by the towering reputation she has built in her 12 years presiding over a courtroom in Illinois' Northern District might be surprised to learn that she found her way to the federal bench at the remarkably young age of 35 almost by accident.

"I confess, I did not think I had a shot at it," she said. "I was young, I was not political, I had never made a campaign contribution in my life. But I was committed to public service, and I thought this would show that commitment and help me out down the road."

At just over five feet tall, the petite Chicago powerhouse is one of the most promising young stars in the judicial firmament and is widely seen as destined for a spot on future appellate court short-lists.

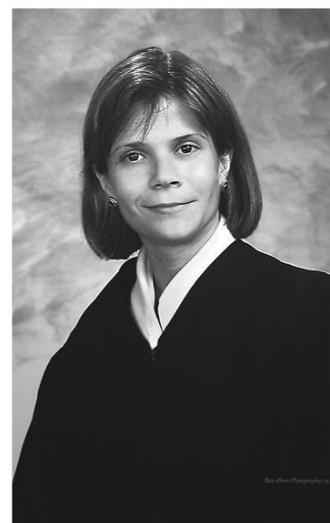
Though young, she was hardly an unknown in 2002, when Illinois Sen. Peter Fitzgerald put out a call for applications to the bench. On the heels of a high-profile gig on the Whitewater Independent Counsel team and a five-year stint in the U.S. attorney's office, St. Eve had just taken a lucrative position as a senior counsel with Abbott Laboratories when she interviewed for the open seat almost on a whim.

"I was 19 weeks pregnant with my third child, but that was not known at the time and I didn't want that to be a factor, so I squeezed into the last possible thing I could wear," she recalled. "I went and interviewed with the senator, and no one was more surprised than me when he called later and told me he was sending my name to the president."

Keeping Cool in the National Spotlight

If Fitzgerald's nomination of the relatively green St. Eve seemed unexpected at the time, 12 years later it looks nothing short of genius. Much-loved by the Chicago bar for her razor-sharp intellect and command of the courtroom, Judge St. Eve has also earned rave reviews for her handling of some of the most high-profile cases in the district, including the headline-grabbing trials of Rod Blagojevich fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko and disgraced media mogul Conrad Black.

The daughter of a dentist and a stay-at-home mom, Judge St. Eve says



Judge Amy St. Eve

she never knew any lawyers growing up but was turned on to the idea of a legal career following a college internship in the office of then-Sen. Alan J. Dixon, a fellow native of Belleville, Illinois.

“My impression of law before was being a courtroom lawyer, which I didn’t think was the path I would take,” she said. “But that internship really showed me the breadth of things you could do with a law degree.”

“I had actually considered going to medical school for a while,” she added with a laugh. “But I confess that the dissections in biology might have sealed it for me.”

After studying law at Cornell Law School, she entered private practice with Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP in 1990. Four years later, she had her eye on a job with the U.S. attorney’s office but was locked out by a hiring freeze, when she received a call “out of the blue” inviting her to join Kenneth Starr’s special independent counsel investigating the Whitewater scandal.

She played a key role in securing the fraud convictions of Jim and Susan McDougal and Arkansas Gov. Jim Guy Tucker, an experience she recalls as one of the most formative experiences in her career.

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Schiff Hardin LLP partner

“It was a three-month trial, before a wonderful judge, and I learned a lot from being in his courtroom,” she said. “The media aspect of that case also really taught me about the importance of focusing on what I was doing and what I needed to do, regardless of what the press was doing or saying.”

That experience with the spotlight would prove valuable years later when she found herself the emcee of the Conrad Black circus. After Black was convicted of fraud and obstruction of justice, he lashed out against

Judge St. Eve in a public statement and later disdainfully referenced the “half-demented, much-criticized Chicago judge” who oversaw his conviction in Canada’s National Post.

“I think every judge has to do what works for him or herself, but when I have high-profile cases I don’t read the press about them,” she said. “Sometimes people will send me articles or snippets. But I know what’s going on in the courtroom, so I don’t read the press.”

Schiff Hardin LLP partner Ronald L. Safer, who represented the former general counsel of Black’s Hollinger International Inc., witnessed firsthand Judge St. Eve’s ability to stay cool regardless of how high the wattage of the media spotlight became.

“The international press was closely watching that case, but you wouldn’t know the difference,” Safer said. “I think she acted exactly the same as she would for a pro se litigant who nobody had any interest in. She just tuned it out.”

Indeed, Judge St. Eve says the cases in which she takes the most pride are rarely those that spill the most ink, but rather those that allow her to play a positive role in the personal stories of individual litigants.

She pointed specifically to a criminal defendant she convicted on drug charges early on in her career on

the bench. The man did not have a high school diploma, and at his sentencing she tried to impress upon him the importance of getting his GED while behind bars so he could find work when he was eventually released.

“Several years later, he came back in on a sentence reduction and specifically asked if he could come back to my court with it,” she said. “At the end he asked if he could address me directly, and he handed up his degree. He was very proud. It was tremendously rewarding.”

A Fine Balance

While her handling of cases large and small has made her one of the most popular judges in the Chicago bar, Judge St. Eve admits that along the way she has had to deal with more than a few attorneys who mistakenly assumed the former high school cheerleader and mother of three could be pushed around.

“When I first started on the bench, because I was new and young, I think lawyers tried to test me,” she said. “Occasionally if a lawyer comes in from out of town it will still happen. But I’ve been on the bench 12 years now, and I really don’t see that anymore.”

Despite the pressures of managing a docket of 300-plus cases, Judge St. Eve says she still manages to make family a priority by arriving at the Everett McKinley Dirksen Courthouse in downtown Chicago’s loop well before sunrise most mornings.

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“I’m very productive in the mornings so I can get out and get home in time for homework or dinner,” she said. “For any working parent it’s always a juggle, but one of the advantages is I have a lot of control over my time. For the most part I don’t miss anything at school.”

As if balancing the demands of household and chambers weren't enough, Judge St. Eve also manages to remain active with Cornell Law School's advisory council, serve on the the Loyola Academy board of trustees, work with the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry's educational outreach program, and help run the Posse Foundation, an organization that has sent more than 5,500 local youths to prestigious colleges on full-ride scholarships.

As one of the youngest members of the bench, Judge St. Eve has also dedicated significant time working to bring the judiciary up to speed with the 21st century, taking a lead role in educating her peers about the potentially corrosive influence of modern innovations like social media on the legal process.

Judge St. Eve began surveying jurors about their social media usage in 2011, and asserted in a recently published report that around one in 12 surveyed jurors admitted that they were tempted to post thoughts on their case publicly — a dangerous trend she says could threaten to undermine the jury system.

“Because social media is no longer generational, and is such a way of life for people now, I don't think the average juror who doesn't have any legal education necessarily knows that,” she said. “I have found through my surveys that if you tell jurors not to use social media and explain to them why, they will follow those instructions. Jurors want to do the right thing, but it's up to us to be proactive.”

The Sky's the Limit

For many attorneys in the Chicago bar, the former prosecutor's bone-deep understanding of the intricacies and pitfalls of the trial process is her greatest asset on the bench — and one of the reasons trial attorneys are wary of her potential ascension to a circuit court position.

"She is even-handed, [is] even-tempered, works harder and more efficiently than the lawyers, controls her courtroom without interfering in the lawyers' ability to try a case, and is clear about her expectations," said Crowell & Moring LLP partner Janet Levine. "Like a good umpire she has her strike zone and sticks to it, regardless of which side is up to the plate."

Safer adds that part of what makes Judge St. Eve so well-suited to the job of the trial judge is her uncanny memory and encyclopedic familiarity with courtroom procedure.

"She knows the rules of evidence backward and forward, and how to apply them," Safer said. "If you were trying 50 cases as a prosecutor and 50 cases as a defense attorney, it would be hard to find a judge in the country you'd want to be in front of more."

Safer notes that while Judge St. Eve will likely be offered many opportunities to move up the judicial ladder "if there is any sanity in the world," he laments that her departure for a circuit court position would be a tremendous loss for the trial bar.

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"I'm sure she'd be a great court of appeals judge, but frankly — and maybe I'm wrong about this — I think those are easier to find than a great trial judge," Safer said. "A great trial judge has 350 cases, and they're in the eye of a hurricane and have to keep this all orchestrated and keep their sense of humor and keep their compassion."

For her part, Judge St. Eve says she's focused on the present and far too busy with her caseload and her family to daydream of a promotion to the Seventh Circuit or beyond.

"I come to a job every day that I love, and know that I'm blessed by the fact that I can still say that after 12 years on bench," she said. "It's a lifetime appointment. I'm flattered people ask that, but I really don't think that way."

In Chambers is a regular feature presenting in-depth profiles of the nation's leading state, federal and appellate judges.

--Editing by Elizabeth Bowen.