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# BENCHED

## GGU ALUMNI OFFER SOUND JUDGMENT

by Melissa Stein

We often see them on television, somber in their black robes, presiding over cases that define the very fabric of our society. We may imagine them shut up in their chambers for days on end, wrestling with the finer points of the law until they come to the one decision that upholds our country's values and traditions. But just how do judges end up on the bench — and how do they make all those potentially life-altering decisions?

We spoke with three sitting judges who graduated from the GGU School of Law. While they all embrace their profession with a seemingly innate ease, the judiciary was not necessarily their lifelong ambition: Hon. Philip Pro had never even met a lawyer until law school; Hon. Sandra Snyder planned a career as a literature professor; and Hon. Gail Dekreon was studying to be a social worker when the law swept her off her feet.

All three, though, share a truly amazing decisiveness. "Making decisions? That part's easy," Dekreon says. "The law exists. I know what the law is and, if I have a question, I'll look at my books, or I'll call my colleagues. I can see both sides, and I can still make a decision."

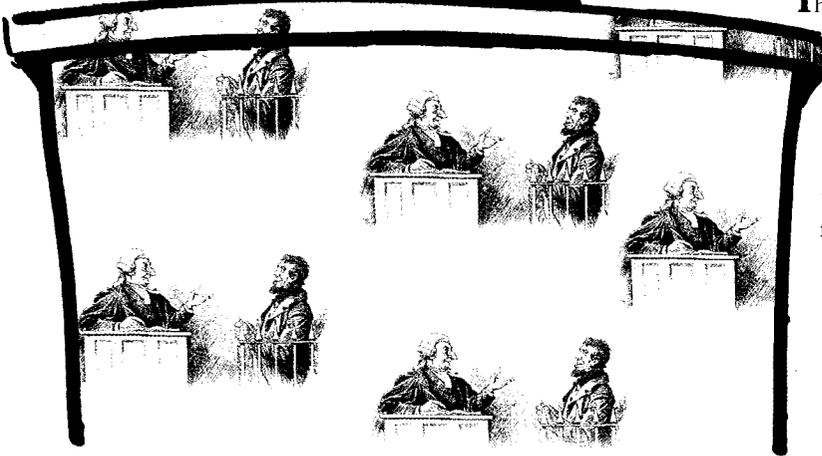
Advises Pro: "Don't get hung up on this or that theoretical kind of issue — get it decided. It's not going to get any easier if you sit it on the table and think about it tomorrow and the next day. You just have to kind of come to grips with it."

Perhaps Snyder sums up her job most succinctly: "I would get bored silly if I were sitting in my chambers all the time just reading about the law. You've got to read it, you've got to know it, you have to understand it — but then you've got to go out and share it."



## SANDRA M. SNYDER

*Magistrate Judge, US District Court,  
Eastern District, Fresno, Calif.*



***“You have to believe in your core that it is your responsibility and your obligation to enforce the law.”***

Though she tried her best to resist a career in law, fate — or at least her admiring colleagues — had other plans for Sandra M. Snyder (JD 76), who has served as a US magistrate judge for the past 10 years.

“I absolutely love what I do,” she says, glowingly. “I get up in the morning and — it’s no joke — I think about what my day is and what my calendar is, and I get excited. I can’t wait to get in my car, I can’t wait to get downtown, turn on my computer, pull up my messages, talk to my colleagues, check in with my staff and take whatever the day has to give me.”

She attributes this excitement to her being the quintessential people person. “I think it’s because I so enjoy people. Even people who come in in jumpsuits and have allegedly done bad things. I don’t mind looking them in the eye and talking with them and telling them why I’m retaining them or letting them out.”

Also key is her extraordinary patience. “I bet I can count on the fingers of one hand the times in my whole life that I’ve been truly angry at anybody or anything,” she says. “I don’t have that button.” This temperament suits her perfectly for judging — and behind it all is her conviction in the power of the law: “You *have* to believe in your core that it is your responsibility and your obligation to enforce the law.”

Snyder’s first brush with the legal life came in August 1970, when her husband was

entering the GGU School of Law. The young couple needed money, so Snyder scrambled to take a shorthand class so she could find some sort of secretarial work. “On the day I was about to panic, we went to Golden Gate to pick up some books, and [then-Dean Lani Bader] had just lost his only support-staff person. And he said to me: ‘Are you looking for a job? Can you type? Can you take shorthand? You’re hired.’ And it was a great job — I got to know so many of the professors whom I still hold dear to my heart.”

When her husband was completing his second year of law school, the dean took her aside and told her: “You should be a lawyer. You should really think about it.” Snyder had no desire to be a lawyer; for years, she’d planned to pursue a career teaching literature. Nevertheless, the dean made her an offer she couldn’t refuse: She would continue to work for the Law School, and the school would pay her tuition and purchase her books. After much resistance, Snyder entered the program.

“The first year was a killer,” she confesses. “It was not easy for me; it was not fun, and I didn’t do smashingly well — but I got through it.” Since her husband was now studying for the Bar, she decided another year wouldn’t hurt, and then another. . . . “That truly is how I wound up finishing law school, taking the Bar, passing it and becoming a lawyer. It just *happened*.”

In fairly rapid succession, Snyder found out she was pregnant, had passed the Bar, and that her husband didn’t love being a lawyer. The marriage didn’t last, and after some financial struggles as a single mom, Snyder took a job at the district attorney’s office in Fresno, Calif., near where her parents lived. She found she adored litigation so much that “I liked to win, but I didn’t even mind losing.”

Snyder decided to go into private practice and, from 1981 to 1989, she worked on primarily civil cases. When one of her mentors in the field approached her, saying, “Sandra,

you should really be a judge — we need more women on the bench,” Snyder (doubtless in a haze of déjà vu) protested: “I don’t want to be a judge. I love what I’m doing, I love where I am, I’m happy.” Her champion backed off, but returned twice more during the next year when job openings arose. “I don’t know that I’m going to take ‘no’ for an answer,” her mentor persisted. “Why don’t you just apply?”

Snyder put in an application and promptly forgot about it — until nine months later, when she was told she’d just been appointed judge in Fresno County Municipal Court. “Just like when the dean said, ‘I’m going to admit you to law school,’ it’s like, ‘Oh no, what have I done!’ All these sharp right turns in my life!” Snyder laughs.

She was soon elevated to superior court, making her the first woman on the Fresno Superior Court in 12 years. “When I was appointed, Fresno County women lawyers and women’s groups had been trying for a long time to put a woman on that bench. The huzzahs went up; there were incredible parties. I felt that I’d been given a gift and I had to protect it. The job wasn’t about me, it was about all the women who were holding their breath for this job.”

Yet true to Snyder’s career-long role as unwilling-but-eventually-grateful beneficiary, an opening arose on the federal bench in 1993, and a former colleague from the DA’s office urged her to apply. Knowing nothing about federal law, she tried fending him off, but eventually interviewed for — and got — the job. “I was just dumbfounded,” she says. “Here was the third time I had literally been talked into doing something that was never part of my plan; it was not on my to-do list, ever. ... But I believe strongly in divine intervention. It was all kind of working, and working for a reason.”

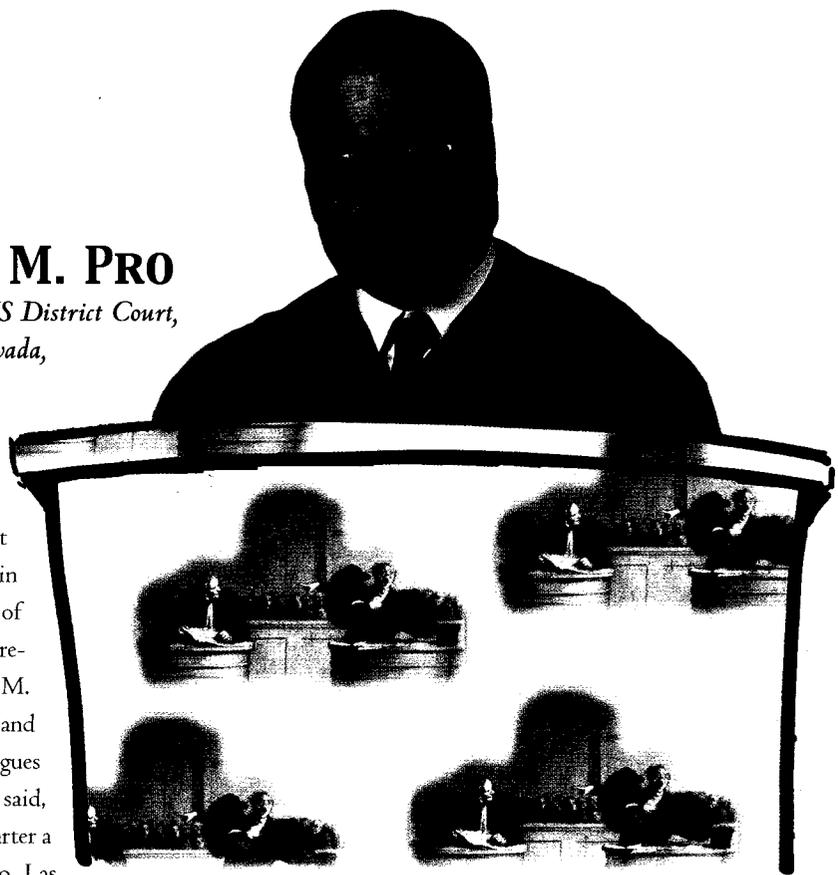
## PHILIP M. PRO

*Chief Judge, US District Court,  
District of Nevada,  
Las Vegas*

I remember sitting in class one day at Golden Gate in my third year of law school,” recounts Philip M. Pro (JD 72), “and one of my colleagues piped up and said, ‘We ought to charter a plane and fly to Las Vegas.’ And I thought, ‘Why in the hell would we want to go to Las Vegas? Let’s go to Tahoe, but what’s in Las Vegas?’ A year later I was living here, and 31 years later, I’m still here!”

According to Pro, “Las Vegas is painfully normal. [Of course,] that’s like telling somebody, as a friend of mine said, that you’ve got two heads and that’s painfully normal. ... Las Vegas is a fascinating place, a microcosm of the entire country. The gaming and hotel tourism industry is the 800-pound gorilla, there’s no denying that,” but Pro claims the kinds of cases he has are no different from, say, cases in San Francisco. As a district judge, he “can jump from an antitrust case to a securities case to a tort case, to a Title 7 employment discrimination case ... and, criminally, it’s the same thing, a range: bank robberies, drug cases, racketeering, taxes — you name it.”

Though he’s jocular and easygoing, Pro takes his responsibilities as a judge very seriously. “Your job is to apply your honesty, your integrity, your hard work and your preparation to achieving a fair result ... you’re serving a very important ideal that provides some degree of stability and



***“Your job is to apply your honesty, your integrity, your hard work and your preparation to achieving a fair result.”***

predictability to people so that when they engage in commercial affairs or personal affairs, they can do so with some assurance that if things go wrong, there is a place they can go to get a fair resolution that's consistent with what they understood the law to be. You're there to serve, not to rule," he explains.

Though Pro had a bent toward public service early on, he'd never even met a lawyer until he attended the Golden Gate University School of Law in 1969. His father ran a gas station in Richmond, Calif., and his family didn't associate with many professionals. But as "a fairly verbal youngster, a precocious kid," he would debate almost anything around the dinner table, prompting his parents to tell him he ought to be a lawyer, and portrayals of the law in movies and books caught his eye as he grew up.

The political climate had an effect, as well, Pro says: "When John Kennedy was elected president, he had, for people of my generation, a fairly profound impact and energized a lot of people into wanting to be involved in government, to use their careers to have an impact in a public sense."

While in law school, he got involved in projects such as law-related education, teaching law to high-school students and "turning them on to their rights and responsibilities as citizens." Finding such work exciting, he has continued to participate in a wide variety of legal-education programs to this day, both nationally and internationally.

While waiting for his 1972 California Bar exam results, Pro spotted an opening for a clerk to a Las Vegas judge on a GGU placement-office bulletin board. Though he had a prospective job with the district attorney's office in Santa Clara County all but wrapped up, and though he'd grown up in the Bay Area and had no thoughts of leaving, a one-year stint in Las Vegas sounded intriguing.

"Once I got here, I saw a tremendous opportunity for a young lawyer to get some

career development. California, then as now, was a pretty tight job market. Nevada, particularly Las Vegas, was growing by leaps and bounds. There were probably 180,000 people in 1972; now we're kissing 2 million. It literally has exploded," he says.

Wanting courtroom experience after his clerkship, Pro decided to work at the county public defender's office. A series of career-building steps followed during the next seven years: assistant US attorney, private practice, deputy attorney general and chief assistant US attorney in Reno, Nev. "I couldn't hold a job, as you can see from my resume," Pro laughs.

From the time he started clerking, he'd known he wanted to be a judge, so when a magistrate judge position — at the time, a fledgling component of the federal judiciary, created by the courts for the courts — became available in 1980, Pro applied and got the job.

"Six weeks later," Pro recalls, "the MGM hotel burned, and I was sitting in traffic watching the helicopters go over and thinking, 'There are going to be a lot of lawsuits over that.' ... I spent the next three years working on that to a heavy extent." Since then, he's worked on a number of high-profile cases, including the notorious Tailhook convention case involving sexual harassment of a female Navy lieutenant. After six years as a magistrate judge, he was appointed by President Reagan in 1987 to US district judge, a lifetime appointment that's confirmed by the Senate.

"You're finally in a job you're not going to leave — you stay in your office till you die," the once-peripatetic Pro explains with a laugh.

Settled into his position, he finds a true sense of gratification in his work: "While there are challenges to be sure and very human issues that you deal with, the wonderful aspect of it is that you're not cast in a position of advocating necessarily for a client one way or the other. ... It sounds trite or almost kind of corny, but your client is justice."

## GAIL DEKREON

*Judge, Superior Court, San Francisco*

In her 21 years in private practice in San Francisco, Gail Dekreon (JD 81) thrived on the autonomy of running her own business, never even considering government work. Yet on Jan. 6, 2003, she was sworn in as San Francisco Superior Court judge, an elected position for which she'd campaigned vigorously.

According to Dekreon: "San Francisco's municipal-court bench was very diverse: It was about 50/50 men and women, we had gays and lesbians on the bench, people of African-American descent, people of Hispanic descent. But then when you looked at the superior-court bench, it was almost all straight males. ... That was very telling to me: This bench isn't really reflecting what San Francisco looks like.

"I ran because I'm just not the kind of person the government would appoint. I'm not politically connected, all my spare-time work is pro bono work — the AIDS Legal Referral Panel, Bay Area Lawyers for Individual Freedom — all legal stuff, not politics. I'm not a huge contributor. I could offer somebody who's independent, autonomous."

As a neighborhood, "grass-roots" lawyer turned judge, Dekreon feels a special obligation to make the sometimes-baffling court system more accessible to the average person. "I think we saw from the reaction to the O.J. Simpson trial and the Rodney King incident that the courts aren't a part of people's everyday lives. The courts seem to be exclusive and not involved with the voters, yet [voters are] paying for it." Dekreon resolved "not to be an Ivy League, ivory-tower judge; I was going to be available to the people, the litigants, and make this court user-friendly."

Dekreon grew up in Alaska and attended college there, intending to major in sociology. The University of Alaska had a "year in action" program, in which juniors were paid and received academic credit for working in an

agency in their field, so Dekreon selected an adviser who was well known in social work. But another opportunity presented itself: A friend of Dekreon's was working as an investigator for the public defender in Anchorage and hated it. He had to get someone to take his seat in the highly selective program, and Dekreon jumped at the chance. By the end of the year, she had decided to be a lawyer.

In 1977, when Dekreon graduated from college, Alaska had too small a population to support any graduate programs, let alone a law school. But it did provide grants for students to attend out-of-state schools. Alaska lawyers had to take the California Bar exam to qualify for the Alaska Bar, so Dekreon set her sights on California. At the time, GGU had a strong connection with the Alaska Supreme Court, so Golden Gate it was.

"I loved it. It was perfect," Dekreon says of GGU. She found that most of the students weren't fresh out of college — they already had some work experience. She enjoyed being in a milieu that wasn't a "must-get-grades-or-you-die sort of situation" and appreciated that the teachers were practitioners in the field. She was fascinated by the challenge of law school. "It was like learning a whole new language," she says.

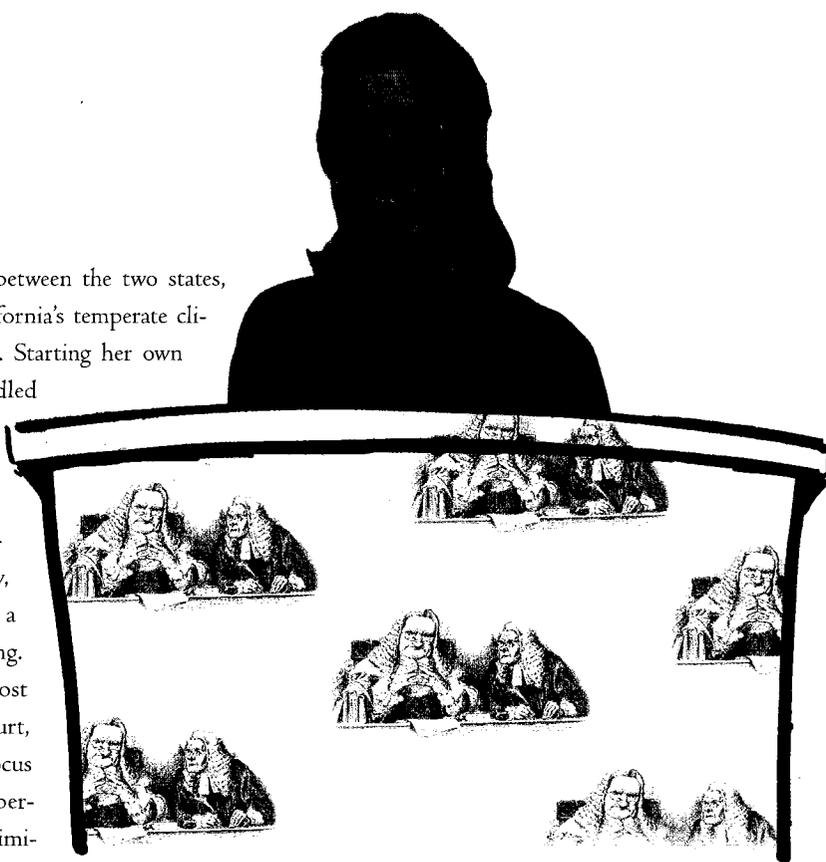
While at GGU, Dekreon worked for firms in California and Alaska, for the California Supreme Court and for the trial courts in Alaska: "I wanted to see what everything was like to see what I would like." After graduating in 1981, she returned to Alaska to work as a research attorney for the superior courts in Fairbanks. At the time, there was a movement to "bring justice to the bush," outlying areas in Alaska where large native populations of Eskimos and Indians lived. Dekreon accompanied judges to small villages, accessible only by bush planes and river boats, allowing defendants to answer charges in their own locales.

Dekreon was admitted to the Alaska and California bars in 1982 and thought about

splitting her time between the two states, but eventually California's temperate climate won her over. Starting her own practice, she handled bankruptcies, personal-injury cases, contracts law, small-business matters, family law, criminal defense — a little of everything. Finding that she most loved going to court, she narrowed her focus to immigration, personal injury and criminal defense.

Her life took a turn when, in 1992, her domestic partner of 10 years became ill with cancer: "I had my own business, everything was wonderful, and suddenly the rug was pulled out from under me, literally." She handed off most of her cases to friends and colleagues in order to care for her partner full time. "It was really hard to recover from that, when she died, to pull my practice back together and to have confidence in myself," she recalls. The experience caused her to look at her life and ask: "Where am I going? What am I going to do with this? *What else is there?*"

After 10 years of hard work and healing, she found that launching a campaign for superior-court judge opened up her life "exponentially." Though she's definitely finding it a change to work for the government — including having to get up at dawn to run her two dogs in the park instead of fitting them in at lunch — she's enthusiastic about the new challenges of being on the bench. And, of course, along with the challenges, there are some perks. Some of her favorites: "Everybody stands up when you walk in the room. . . . People call me 'Judge' as my first name now. . . . Working with attorneys, when I start talking, everyone stops and listens — are my jokes *really* funny?" **GGU**



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