

El Dorado County public defender retiring

By Kathryn Reed

When Rick Meyer wakes up a week from today he won't be getting dressed for court, or even the office. And while his days as a criminal defense attorney will not be over, they will be when it comes to working for El Dorado County.

On Feb. 15, he retires as chief public defender, a position he has had since 1999. Meyer, 59, started working in the El Dorado County Office of Public Defender on Sept. 12, 1983.



Rick Meyer, El Dorado County public defender, will retire on Feb. 15. Photo/Provided

He has had his share of notorious clients through the years, pointing to the Coddington and Platz cases as two of the more memorable. Meyers described them both as challenging, and ones that consumed numerous hours.

Herbert James Coddington, who was in his 20s at the time, murdered two women at his residence in the Tahoe Verde Mobile Home Park on May 16, 1987, and kidnapped and sexually assaulted a 14-year-old and 12-year-old girl. He is sitting on death row.

In 2003, Lisa Platz was found guilty of the 2001 murder of her 9-year-old daughter, Rebecca Aramburo. The child was found with her throat slashed inside a tent at Campground by the Lake. Platz was sentenced to life in prison. Her boyfriend James Csucsai hanged himself in jail.

“The public doesn’t always understand the intricacies of these things, how when you get these clients they are real live human beings you develop relationships with,” Meyer told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We are defending the constitutional rights of these people. Ninety-nine percent are good people who have done something wrong.”

While the number of residents and tourists in town has declined in the nearly 30 years Meyer has been a public defender, the caseload has remained fairly steady. A change is that in the 1980s and 1990s he said there were more drug cases than there are now.

Meyer started his professional career with a private law firm in Placerville after graduating from law school in 1978. He was recruited to join the Public Defender Office in 1983. He started off in South Lake Tahoe. When he was offered the top job in the department he said he’d take it as long as he could stay in Tahoe.

(Meyer is the only county department head based in South Lake Tahoe. When a replacement is named that person will be working out of Placerville.)

El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury first knew Meyer as a colleague. Meyer hired Kingsbury to work for him in the early 1990s.

“It was Rick that encouraged me to run for an open seat on the Superior Court that became available when Judge Terry Finney retired. I was not, nor am I now a political person, and the thought of running for office was abhorrent to me. I wasn’t sure that I could do it, or that it was the job for me,”

Kingsbury told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Rick's harping, hectoring and cajoling eventually wore me down. Those same persuasive powers have served him well during his legal career."

Meyer, now that he is leaving and has nothing to gain by going on the record, spoke of his mutual respect for Kingsbury and the other jurists who are or have been on the local bench.

"We are very blessed in this community to have really fine judges. They all care about people and are uncommonly willing to go out of their way to do the right thing," Meyer said.

Meyer has long been a champion for those who don't always have a loud voice.

Beyond the courtroom, Meyer has been on the Family Resource Center board since 1999. Currently, he is president.

"He really works for the underdog. He has always been very conscious of the fact that the Latino population doesn't get what the rest of the community gets," Delicia Spees, executive director of the Family Resource Center said.

"I'm amazed how many times when he calls when his clients need to do community service, need a counselor. I don't see a lot of attorneys do that. They let their secretaries do that," Spees added.

He doesn't just talk a good game, but is also a man of action.

Meyer with then Judge Finney was able to turn hard dirt that wasn't being used for anything into a soccer field next to the center. This allowed the kids at the center to have a respectable play area.

While Meyer has a job that brings him into contact with people who are accused of a variety of crimes, he sees the good in most of them.

"Rick is a tireless advocate for the less fortunate members of

our community. In particular, he is a champion for our Latino residents, especially the youth," Kingsbury said. "He is not afraid to take on an unpopular cause if he believes it to be worthy. I don't always agree with his positions, but respect what he has to say."

Meyer will continue to work as Alpine County's public defender. For the last two years it had been contracted out through El Dorado County, but will change next week to Meyer doing the work as a private individual on a contractual basis with Alpine.

But what Meyer really wants is to be hired full time by Lake Tahoe Community College to teach political science. He is an adjunct faculty member now. About five years ago he went back to school to obtain his master's just for this purpose.

He also expects to be spending more time with his wife at their Echo Lake cabin, traveling and perhaps teaching abroad.

"It's been interesting, challenging and very rewarding," Meyer said of his time with El Dorado County. "All of us who do defense work love our work. It's very gratifying to stand up for somebody."