



Published in the 2017 November/December issue of the *Hennepin Lawyer*, a membership publication of the Hennepin County Bar Association. Used with permission. 612-752-6000 thl@hcba.org

Justice Anne McKeig

As a descendant of the White Earth Nation, Anne McKeig recently became the first American Indian to serve on the Minnesota Supreme Court. While many now know her as “Justice McKeig,” she prefers to simply be called “Anne.”

“When people find out I am a judge, there is an immediate switch,” McKeig said. “They change the way they treat me. It is a sad day when people only treat you better because of your status. It should not matter. It’s a job. It’s important to me, and I take it very seriously, but it does not define me. I am still just ‘Anne.’ My mom did not name me ‘Justice.’”

Known for wearing blue jeans under her black robe, McKeig brings a down-to-earth attitude and common-sense approach to Minnesota’s highest court. She is hardworking and humble—traits that are surely a product of where she was raised.

McKeig grew up in a double-wide trailer in the village of Federal Dam in northern Minnesota (population 106). McKeig beams with pride whenever she mentions her hometown. McKeig describes the community of Federal Dam as supportive and generous. “People in Federal Dam do not care about what you do; they care about how you are doing.”

McKeig remembers her childhood in Federal Dam as “good, clean fun.” Growing up, she spent a lot of time outdoors, building forts and rafts with her brothers. According to McKeig, she was quite the “tomboy” and once used her own money to redecorate her bright pink bedroom with blue carpeting and blue paint.

When McKeig was 13 years old, she started working as a dishwasher at one of Federal Dam’s two supper clubs. She took on many different roles at the restaurant, often acting as cook, waiter, and janitor all during the same shift. McKeig returned to her job at the restaurant during her breaks from college. She recalls a group of farmers who started leaving her a tip once they learned that she was saving money to go to law school.

Education was always a priority for McKeig’s parents. There was never any question that she would go to college at St. Catherine University (locally referred to as “St. Kate’s”), which is the same college that her mother, Cecelia Wattles McKeig, attended.

McKeig remembers her mother often having the nuns from St. Kate’s to the family’s home in Federal Dam. “It was always a big day when the nuns would come up north. My mom would uncover our dining room table, and my brothers and I would be in awe of this beautiful table that was normally hidden away,” said McKeig. McKeig’s “favorite nun” was the one who would have a beer with her father, the late Monte McKeig. “I liked anyone who liked my dad,” she explained.

For McKeig, her father is the personification of her hometown. She says that he is the reason she has such a “profound love” for Federal Dam. McKeig describes her father as quiet and hardworking, with a great sense of humor—a trait that she has surely inherited from him.

Like her father, McKeig tries not to take life too seriously. In fact, she is known for playing the occasional practical joke on other judges and law clerks, bringing some much needed levity to stressful situations. “Life is way too short not to laugh,” she said.

Referee Mary Madden, a colleague of McKeig at the Hennepin County Family Justice Center, was a victim of one of McKeig’s practical jokes. Madden recalled returning to work after a vacation to find her office door closed. “The door was never closed, so I was immediately suspicious,” Madden explained. When Madden opened her door, she discovered her office was covered in aluminum foil. “Everything was covered—my bookcases, chairs, phone, the computer mouse, and even my pen,” Madden said. According to Madden, it was immediately clear that the practical joke was the work of McKeig, who had also enlisted Madden’s law clerks for help.

A career in law was not always McKeig’s first choice. She originally wanted to be a country music singer. McKeig often sat in her bedroom with her guitar and wrote her own country songs. She even competed in local talent competitions and events at her school. Judicial officers and law clerks were treated to one of McKeig’s performances when she sang “Take This Job and Shove It” by Johnny Paycheck at Judge Jane Ranum’s retirement party.

While McKeig’s parents were always supportive of her goals, they encouraged her to have a backup plan in case she did not make it to Nashville. McKeig did not grow

I want my time on the bench to open the door for those who come after me, not close it.

up with judges or attorneys in her family. She only realized she wanted to become an attorney after learning that being a dentist required too much science. She credits numerous mentors for helping her navigate the legal field and ultimately land a job in the Hennepin County Attorney's Office, where she worked for more than 15 years in the child protection division.

McKeig interviewed with numerous places for a job, but the thought of working as a public attorney intrigued her. "When I interviewed with the county attorney's office, I felt like myself. I thought—who doesn't want to do what is right on behalf of kids and families for a living?" she said.

McKeig's commitment to children and families has continued throughout her career. In 2008, Gov. Tim Pawlenty appointed McKeig to the Hennepin County District Court bench. She served in Hennepin County Family Court from 2009 until 2016, when Gov. Mark Dayton appointed her to the Minnesota Supreme Court.

During her time in family court, McKeig served as the presiding judge for three years. In her role as presiding judge, she actively sought out opportunities to improve access to justice for children and families and to address their needs. McKeig was instrumental in securing a federal grant from the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, which was used to fund the "Family Court Enhancement Project." The project has expanded access to free legal representation in domestic abuse proceedings and has changed the way domestic abuse cases involving children are handled in Hennepin County.

"We do not throw kids away," she said. McKeig lives by these words, both in her professional and personal life. She has what she describes as a "blended" family. Three of her five children immigrated to the United States from Mexico and learned English in a makeshift classroom in the family's basement. McKeig has also opened up her home to children who do not have a safe place to land. She accepts them into her family for however long they need.

"I have more than enough, so I believe in looking out for others when I can," McKeig explained. "The only reason I have ever wanted to make more money is so that I would have more money to help take care of others. I can remember feeling desperate to win the Powerball when my dad, who had diabetes, lost both of his legs. I wanted to be able to make him as comfortable as possible while easing the burden on my mom."

McKeig credits her mother for instilling in her a sense of responsibility to others. "My mother has always used her education and experience to stand up for the most vulnerable," she recalled. Cecelia Wattles McKeig is a Fulbright Scholar and a well-known local historian and author in Cass County. She has authored and self-published 12 local history books. It seems fitting that as McKeig's mother works toward preserving her community's history, McKeig is making history.

The significance of McKeig's appointment to the Minnesota Supreme Court is not lost on her. "Of course I want to do a good job, but I also feel an extra sense of responsibility to do a good job," she said. "I want my time on the bench to open the door for those who come after me, not close it."

McKeig wishes that her long-time mentor, Judge Robert Blaeser, who is a trailblazer in his own right, had been the first American Indian appointed to the Court. But as Judge Blaeser reminded her, this historical appointment is about "something much bigger" than any one person.

When asked how her hometown views the Minnesota Supreme Court, McKeig said, "That it is not for them." McKeig hopes that her appointment will change this perception.

"We need to represent all of Minnesota, not just people who have a fancy title or education," she said. "Minnesotans are much more than that, and the Supreme Court is for all Minnesotans, not just a select few."



Brittney Miller

brittney.miller@lawmoss.com

Ms. Miller is an attorney at Moss and Barnett who specializes in the practice of family law. Prior to joining Moss and Barnett, Brittney clerked for Justice McKeig in Hennepin County Family Court.