

Judge acts as father figure on the bench

■ Geauga County Juvenile Court official's goal is to convince youths early on to be responsible for actions

By Jackie Mikula
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Charles "Chip" Henry recalls the first — and last — time he appeared in front of the Geauga County Juvenile Court bench.

As a teen-ager, Henry was forced to stand before Judge Frank Lavrich on a traffic violation charge. Henry's father, Charles Eugene Henry, was county prosecutor at the time — and was determined not to give his son any preferential treatment.

"He just marched me right in and pled me 'true' (the juvenile

equivalent of guilty). There wasn't a lot of due process," Henry joked. "I recall being good and scared."

Several years later, the 41-year-old Auburn Township resident now sits on the bench he once stood before.

He was named Lavrich's successor in 1993 when the probate/juvenile court judge died in office.

Little lessons like the one Henry learned as a teen-ager have helped shape his philosophy, which consistently comes across in each of the rulings he hands down.

Instead of simply handing down punishments, Henry's primary goal is to convince youths early on they need to take responsibility for their actions, own up to their mistakes and find a way to make amends with those they have hurt.

"You're supposed to be like a father figure on the (juvenile



Jackie Mikula/News-Herald

Father knows best: Geauga County Probate/Juvenile Court Judge Charles Henry relaxes on the back porch of his Auburn Township home with wife, Linda, son, Adam and daughter, Kim. Although he tries to keep his roles as father and judge separate, Henry often brings his paternal instincts into the courtroom.

court) bench," he said. "You're not supposed to be an authoritarian figure on the bench enforcing penalties."

Whether it's ordering a juvenile

to do community service, mandating a family go into counseling or suspending a teen-ager's driver's license until they can prove they're on the straight and narrow,

Henry's plan is to keep the subject from coming before him again.

"Hopefully, I'll see them one time, and not again," he said.

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But Henry admits it's impossible to scare a child into reforming.

"I don't personally believe anything I do can make them change," Henry said.

Juvenile Court Administrator David Lubecky, who works closely with Henry, agrees.

"Not every case is a success," he said. "It's also up to the child whether he wants to turn his life around and make the right decisions."

But that doesn't stop Henry from trying.

"I think he does care about every individual that comes in the court," Lubecky said. "He treats each individual with respect."

The judge attempts to keep his job behind the bench separate from his life behind the woods where his secluded Auburn Township home sits.

"He tries not to bring it home a lot," his wife, Linda, comments as the family relaxes in rockers and enjoys a sunset from the back porch of their home. "What he does is pretty emotional up there. There's a lot of tough cases. It would be very difficult for him to think about it all the time."

Yet, Henry admits the two roles can overlap at times. He jokes that speeches he rattles to juveniles in court are often recycled for his 14-year-old son, Adam, and his 11-year-old daughter, Kim.

"I'm sure my kids have heard some of the same lectures that the kids in court have heard," Henry said. "And they're some of the same lectures I heard from my dad."

Although his children share

knowing glances at the mention of infamous monologues, both admit they have never been subjected to ridicule by friends or felt there is any stigma attached to being "the judge's kid."

Henry, who grew up in Bainbridge Township, later met his wife, Linda, in the U.S. Peace Corps, where the two volunteered in Lesotho, Africa. Although he didn't initially plan to, Henry eventually followed in his father's footsteps and decided to get his law degree at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law.

Like his father, Henry went on to serve as an assistant Geauga County prosecutor from 1987 to 1988 before serving as a state senator and public defender.

"I think he was a role model for me," Henry said of his father. "I think he was my best friend."

Unfortunately, Henry lost his mentor and friend in March, when his father died after a long battle with cancer.

"It's going to be a tough Father's Day because it will be the first without dad," Linda said.

However, the extended Henry family — made up mostly of lawyers and teachers (Henry's mother's profession) — plan to spend Father's Day together.

And although Henry will struggle to put some of the tougher cases out of his mind, he gains some reassurance by recalling some of his successes on the bench.

"There's some bad days. But there's never really boring days," he said. "When you see a situation for a child getting better, that's very rewarding."