

HATED, LOVED -- SALFI RETIRES SEMINOLE-BREVARD JUDGE MADE FOES, FRIENDS WITH - INNOVATIONS

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Acclaimed by supporters and blasted by critics during much of his 16 years on the bench, Judge Dominick Salfi leaves the Seminole-Brevard Circuit Court today.

His departure closes a chapter of unusual controversy in the Seminole County courthouse, but his defenders say it also was one of activism that brought needed changes.

During his last weeks with the court, Salfi, 48, maintained a low profile, working to clear his docket. He declined an interview, but several of those who worked closely with him said he remains controversial.

J.R. Russo, public defender for the 18th Judicial District, summed up the feelings of most critics by both condemning and applauding Salfi.

"I found him a difficult judge to work for," Russo said, "largely perhaps because he tended to be creative and innovative in a tightly structured system that doesn't lend itself to change."

Russo said he admired Salfi's intellect and believed he would be an outstanding teacher or serve well in other legal capacities that are more receptive to innovation.

Dolph Voge, former head of the juvenile arbitration program and an unabashed Salfi admirer, also admits to some disapproval of the man with whom he worked closely for more than five years.

"I didn't like his psychological probing" of defendants and those he worked with. "But the positives outweigh the negatives," Voge said, "and the net result of his being a judge was that he was effective."

Salfi caused controversy almost as soon as he was appointed to the bench in 1970 by Gov. Claude Kirk. At 33, he was the youngest circuit judge in Florida history, and earlier had served two years, 1967 to 1969, as the first Seminole-Brevard state attorney.

County Commissioner Sandra Glenn recalls that Salfi brought innovative ideas -- many of them court alternatives -- back from judicial seminars and then pushed for their funding by a county commission much more conservative than the present one. Most of his proposals squeaked by on 3-to-2 votes, Glenn said, and most commissioners still are reluctant to put out money for unconventional ideas launched in California, especially in areas for which the state should be responsible.

Among the programs were Guardian Ad Litem, which assigns trained volunteers to help children and youths who have been abused by a relative, and the juvenile arbitration program, now called Prosecution Alternatives for Youth. Both have been highly acclaimed and adopted by other Florida counties.

Recently much of the criticism directed at Salfi centered on claims that he was unfair to women in divorce cases, and on his handling of drug cases. Some accused him of trying to be a courtroom psychologist, probing the minds of criminal defendants. Lawyer critics complained of voluminous paperwork and long hours brought on by his unorthodox procedures.

Perhaps the target of the most criticism, though, was his handling of juvenile cases.

Fueling much of the controversy was Salfi's divorce, his daughter's bout with drug abuse and her subsequent treatment by Straight Inc., a controversial treatment program for which Salfi became an outspoken advocate.

Those aspects of his personal life, critics said, colored his decisions.

However, Salfi shrugged off that criticism. "How can I be anything but a product of my personal life?" he would ask.

At one time, Citizens for Justice, an organization dominated by women unhappy with his handling of their divorces, erected a billboard outside Sanford calling for his impeachment. The group also organized picket lines around the courthouse, displaying signs denigrating him.

However, one woman unhappy with him after her divorce said she has come to admire him, which underscores the intense love-hate

feelings he engendered.

In a letter to the editor she wrote that she has come to "understand why he made the decisions he did," adding that, like her, others have realized "that if he was tough, it was because he had the courage to be strong, when doing less would have been easier, or made him more popular."

Toughness is a word used frequently in describing Salfi. Many thought he was too tough.

Frequently, and almost always with juveniles, he would require convicted defendants to suggest their penalty. And just as frequently, he was apt to point out that the suggested terms were not realistic, were pandering to the court, and would likely be broken.

It was such unorthodox and time-consuming procedures, particularly in juvenile court, that upset his lawyer critics. His goals, said one attorney, were admirable. The problem was reaching those goals, the attorney said.

If a juvenile offender broke a contract, Salfi was quick to assess the agreed-upon penalty, a point that some state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services counselors criticized. They preferred gradually increasing pressure. Salfi's response was that people must learn early the consequences of their actions.

Though most lawyers who discussed Salfi didn't want to be identified, a Seminole Bar poll conducted last year gave some indication of their feelings. Salfi got low marks for courtesy, promptness of calendar and flexibility, but high marks in legal and judicial skills, breadth of knowledge and community service.

In overall rankings, he came in second from last among the five judges.

Whatever the source of criticism, Salfi would shrug it off. He was using the judicial system creatively, he would say.

As for the critical lawyers, he said their criticism was sour grapes. The low marks for courtesy and flexibility stemmed from his demands that "lawyers do what the law requires them to do . . . that they be knowledgeable and prepared."

Fine, said one lawyer, but the court is not the place for creativity; be creative elsewhere.

At one point the HRS and state attorney went to the district court of appeal with complaints that Salfi was unreasonable in his demands of court officers. The justices agreed; changes were ordered.

Controversy involving Salfi was not limited to bench matters. When space at the courthouse was especially tight, he tangled with the county commission over space allocated to the courts. There were ill feelings for a time, but most felt the confrontation resulted in improvements.

Salfi announced his resignation last summer, planning to quit Nov. 16, but agreed to Gov. Bob Graham's request to serve until his successor took office in January. The successor is Bill Eaton, elected in November's general election. Salfi's next stop: a new law office in Longwood.

- **Caption: PHOTO: Dominick Salfi**

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