Elizabeth Hayden ’68 – District Court Judge

What year did you graduate from CSB? / What was your major? I graduated from the College of St. Benedict in 1968 with a major in social work.

In my current role, I vow to: In my current role I vow to maintain the integrity of the office of District Court Judge and to give each case my thoughtful consideration after listening respectfully and attentively to those appearing before me. I vow to do my best to be patient, even on days when there are too many cases scheduled for the time allowed. I vow to be patient when ill-tempered litigants berate the legal system, other parties, or me. I vow to show compassion to those who have been wronged, hurt, or may just be overwhelmed with life. I will do my best to maintain a sense of balance in my life which will help me to achieve these goals. It is the Benedictine way.

Why do you do the work you do? The short answer is because I can. I am grateful for my appointment to the bench and my subsequent election to this position. Over the years I have developed some skills that help me work with all kinds of people working toward solving their problems. I continue to enjoy my work and find satisfaction in what I do. I hope and believe I am contributing to society as I perform the duties of a District Court Judge.

What drives you? / Why are you passionate about this field? I believe the work of the court is important and serious business. What makes the work so challenging, satisfying, surprising and often sad is the people who are appearing before me with problems that need to be solved. I have always enjoyed people even during their most trying times. If I can help them sort through their problems and bring some peace of mind or hope for their future, then it has been a good day. After 22 years on the bench I have developed some negotiating skills that have helped me be in getting cases settled. I enjoy the work I do and continue doing the job because I want to.

Describe a typical day at your job. First, there really is no typical day. My days are as varied as the personalities who appear before me and the nature of their legal issues. Most days I am in court the majority of the day. Days in trial mean I am with the same parties and attorneys for the entire day. Other days are a very full schedule of as many as 75 or more individual cases. On rare occasion I have the rare opportunity to spend time at my desk reading about the law and writing orders or reviewing files for future proceedings.

What was your path to get to your current position? When I was planning for college my high school counselor suggested I consider pursuing a degree in social work, I think he recognized my interest in working with people. After graduating from the College of St. Benedict with a degree in social work I had positions which allowed me the opportunity to work with lawyers and those experiences peaked my interest in the law. After several years as a social worker I had a case in which I was the state’s main witness. Based upon that experience I decided that I would go to law school. Having been subjected to a half day of ill-prepared cross-examination, I decided that I could do what that lawyer was doing except that I would do it better
because I would do my homework. At age 29 I started law school. Following graduation I spent six years as a prosecutor in the Stearns County Attorney’s Office. During that time I was encouraged to apply for a position as a District Court Judge and in 1986 I was appointed to the bench by Governor Rudy Perpich.

What are some common misconceptions that the general public has about your field or your job? People often believe that a judge spends the majority of her time doing legal research and writing learned legal opinions. That was a luxury available years ago but the increase in the work of the courts now prevents judges from having enough time to reflect on the cases that come before us. I believe there is a perception that judges have a great deal of power and control over our schedule and the matters that come before us. The truth is, I call my scheduling clerk to ask when it would be convenient for me to go to the dentist.

Another misconception, I think is that laypeople who appear me before think that I know all of the laws that would pertain to their case. In fact, because judges in this County preside over so many types of cases, it is impossible to be familiar with every area of law. In a given week I may preside over serious criminal matters, complex civil litigation, family cases, probate, traffic and conciliation court cases in addition to other miscellaneous matters.

Can you share an example/story from your job that reinforces/illustrates the impact you are having? Recently at the conclusion of a jury trial, as the jurors were leaving the courthouse, a woman approached me to say that several years ago she appeared with her son in a juvenile court case. She said I had questioned and lectured her son. She went on to say that as a result of my discussion with her son, he turned to her on the courthouse steps, hugged her and thanked her for all she did for him.

I’ve had people stop me in public places to thank me for helping them through their divorce by getting their case settled without the need for a trial.

There are times in court when I see people visibly relieved to discover that I will take the time to listen to their story and then tell them how I reached my decision.

Why is it important for people to be involved in public policy or civic engagement? In our democratic system of government our leaders are elected by a vote of the people. This is true in all three branches of government including the courts. If voters ignore the work of the elected officials they will not be informed voters and our systems will suffer for lack of effective leadership.

The judicial branch of government is complex and somewhat of a mystery to most citizens. I believe that is true because few citizens come in contact with the courts with any frequency or opportunity to become familiar with its workings. Judges are elected officials serving terms of six years. Judges try to educate the public by speaking to groups such as students of all ages and service clubs. With the increase in our caseloads it has become increasingly difficult to take time away from court to make these appearances.