



Supreme Court of Florida

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Florida Supreme Court
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Chief Justice Labarga Presents Award for Excellence to Sarasota Judge

TAMPA – Circuit Judge Lee Haworth has presided over cases in all five divisions of Florida’s 12th Judicial Circuit since he was elected to the bench more than a quarter of a century ago. His length of service, though, pales in comparison with the quality of his service, Florida Chief Justice Jorge Labarga said Monday as he presented Judge Haworth with the newly established Chief Justice Award for Judicial Excellence.

Many people might assume Judge Haworth’s legacy rests on the leadership he displayed when the housing crisis slammed Florida, leadership that stemmed first from his actions as chief judge in the 12th Circuit and continued as a member of a statewide commission charged with making recommendations for handling the flood of foreclosure cases swamping Florida’s courts, Chief Justice Labarga said. But, he added, they would be wrong.

Some people might assume Judge Haworth’s legacy rests on all he has done to improve the lives of abused and neglected children in the first circuit court in Florida to privatize foster care but, again, they would be wrong, Chief Justice Labarga said.

Some people might assume Judge Haworth’s legacy rests on his contributions to equal and fair funding of Florida’s court system or to his work on adapting technological advances to the needs of courtroom judges or his focus on meeting the needs of veterans struggling to find their bearings after their service to their country is over. They would all be wrong, Chief Justice Labarga said.

Judge Haworth has made so many important and meaningful contributions to Florida’s justice system that it would be an error to focus on just one of them, Chief Justice Labarga said as he presented the award at the annual education program for Florida’s 599 circuit judges. Whenever a need became known or a crisis loomed, Judge Haworth responded with integrity, courage, innovation, energy and compassion, the chief justice said.

Last month, Miami-Dade County Judge Steve Leifman was awarded the judicial excellence award for county judges. A selection committee of two county judges and two circuit judges, appointed by their respective judicial conferences, selected both award recipients from nominations made by judges.

Judge Haworth was elected to the circuit court in the 12th Judicial Circuit, which includes Sarasota, Manatee and Desoto counties, in 1988. He served as chief judge of the circuit from July 2007 through June 2011. He currently hears cases in the juvenile division. He will retire at the end of this month because of Florida's mandatory retirement age for judges.

Judge Haworth, who was born in Sarasota, earned both his bachelor's degree and his law degree from the University of Tennessee. After graduating in 1970, he worked in the prosecutor's office in Sarasota, including a stint as chief prosecutor. Later he entered private practice, working as a civil trial attorney for 18 years. He was also in the Army Reserve for more than two decades.

In 1991, two years after Judge Haworth came to the bench, he was called to active duty in Kuwait as part of Operation Desert Storm. As Lieutenant Colonel Haworth, he headed the Department of the Army's War Crimes Documentation Center investigating Iraqi war crimes.

In 2000, Judge Haworth was "recognized for outstanding child advocacy by the Supreme Court and the Governor of the State of Florida for your dedication to abused and neglected children and service to the Guardian Ad Litem Program." In the 12th Circuit, he instituted innovative programs like the Family Safety Alliance and Foster Care ombudsman.

In 2004, the Florida Supreme Court commended Judge Haworth for his work on the statewide Trial Court Budget Commission, praising his "outstanding leadership and inexhaustible efforts to develop and obtain adoption of a Revision 7 infrastructure and budget that ensure Florida's trial courts are able to continue delivering justice in a fair, timely and impartial manner."

Just a few years later, the judges in the 12th Circuit elected Judge Haworth as chief judge. Not long after he began his tenure as chief judge, the housing crisis hit Florida and an avalanche of foreclosure cases crashed into Florida's courts. In his circuit, the number of foreclosures skyrocketed from about 900 in 2006 to more than 8,000 within just two years.

But Judge Haworth acted decisively and effectively, creating the Homestead Conciliation Program, which gave homeowners a court-ordered chance to work out a solution with their banks. Approximately a quarter of the homeowners facing foreclosure in the 12th circuit resolved their cases through the program -- without going to court. The program's success spoke for itself -- Judge Haworth was tapped to serve on the Supreme Court's Foreclosure Task Force, which he did from July through November 2009.

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