

Judge Thomas Storey honored for Youth Court work

July 30, 2009

Clay County Youth Court Referee Thomas B. Storey has been honored for his lifetime work protecting the interests of children. He was presented the Lookin' to the Future Award during a ceremony in Natchez on July 17.

The award was presented during the 2009 Lookin' to the Future Conference and the Mississippi Conference on Child Welfare, sponsored by Southern Christian Services for Children and Youth and the Mississippi Department of Human Services. The joint conference brings together social workers, counselors, therapists, teachers, foster and adoptive parents, mental health professionals and agency administrators.

Judge Storey, who has served as Clay County's Youth Court referee since July 1979, said, "I feel very honored."

Special Assistant Attorney General Patti Marshall presented the award. "It was an honor to present this award to Judge Storey for his many years of service and dedication to issues impacting the children and youth of Mississippi," she said.

Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome, who nominated Judge Storey for the award, said in his nomination letter, "Judge Storey epitomizes the very essence of this award, as he has devoted nearly all of his adult life to the improvement of the lives of children in the juvenile justice system of Mississippi."

Judge Storey was recognized for 30 years of service as a Youth Court referee. He previously served as Clay County prosecuting attorney 1972-1979.

Judge Storey served as a member of the original Mississippi Uniform Youth Court Commission from 1979-1982, helping draft proposed legislation. He helped implement a training program for Youth Court judges and referees. He has worked to gain legislative support for funding and programs for Youth Courts.

For the past eight years, he has served as chairman of the Council of Youth Court Judges.

In 2007, he was appointed by the Mississippi Supreme Court to the Task Force for Youth Court Rules of Procedure. As task force co-chairman, Judge Storey helped oversee the formulation of extensive recommendations for a set of uniform rules to complement the statutes and guide judges, attorneys, social workers, law enforcement and others who deal with the interests of children. The Supreme Court adopted the Uniform Rules of Youth Court Practice effective Jan. 8, 2009.

In Clay County, he created a truancy reduction program. Operation Save Kids is a collaborative community effort. He also worked with Clay and Lowndes County Youth Courts to create adolescent offender programs.

Judge Storey was appointed Clay County Youth Court referee in July 1979 when the Youth Court Act came into effect. Judge Lenore Prather made the appointment when she was a chancellor for the 14th Chancery District.

Reflecting on changes during the past three decades, Judge Storey said, "We have a long way to go, but things have improved tremendously....We are so much better off than we were. Back in 1979, we had nothing but training schools and a very archaic foster care system with no mental health services."

The Youth Court Act created the appointive part-time referee positions. In counties which do not have a County Court, the chancery judge appoints a lawyer to act in a judicial capacity as youth court referee, or in a few counties, the chancery judge hears Youth Court cases. In the 20

counties which have a County Court, those judges also serve as Youth Court judges.

Judge Storey estimates that he spends about 25 percent of his working time on referee duties. He maintains a private civil law practice in West Point.

“I just feel a calling to do it. Some of these cases are very difficult,” Judge Storey said of his work in the Youth Court. “I have been able to be objective about it without letting it overwhelm me. You can easily burn out when you see how terrible some people treat their own children. If you let it bother you a whole lot, you would go crazy. That’s the most difficult part of being a Youth Court judge, dealing with abused children and their parents.”

The reward is in helping a child, and helping a family. “When we release a child from the court and don’t see them again and we realize things have been successful, you feel a great deal of satisfaction,” he said. “When we can finally return a child to that parent, or to the custody of someone else who is going to love them like a parent, whether through adoption or foster care or grandparents, that makes you feel good. It feels especially good when you have parents that are rehabilitated.”

#####