



Baby Judge School, Cherry Blossoms, and COVID

By: Hon. Jacob A. Brown¹

After my first round of “baby judge” school, which consisted of eight four-hour virtual sessions, I was looking forward to the first in-person session being conducted by the Federal Judicial Center (FJC) for newly minted bankruptcy judges since the start of the pandemic. We were scheduled for training from March 21-24, 2022, in Washington, D.C., at the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building. Each year’s crop of recently appointed “baby” bankruptcy judges is a class or “Cohort,” and each group comes up with a name for their Cohort (more on that later). This session had three different Cohorts who attended, with a total of 43 baby judges. The Cohort for Judge Robson and me was the smallest of the three, with just ten judges—a small but mighty bunch. There were also eight seasoned bankruptcy judges that served as faculty. Having set the stage, here’s my travel log. Enjoy!

Sunday, March 20th – Fly to Washington, D.C., in time to meet some of my Cohort at the Old Ebbitt Grill.

Monday, March 21st – Our first day of training started with introductions, after which we broke out into small groups, where each new judge had the opportunity to act as a judge while others, acting out roles such as attorneys, told you how wrong your ruling was or that you didn’t know what you were doing and would be reversed, or forced you to deal with *pro se* siblings fighting over a family business. It was a great way to learn how to deal with some tough situations.

After class, I went for a long walk around the entire mall. I said hello to Abe at his monument and took in the amazing cherry blossoms (approximately 15,000 steps,

¹ Special thanks to the Hon. Grace E. Robson for her contributions to this article.

Court Connection
Volume No. 11 – Issue No. 2
April 2022

give or take). Judge Robson led the charge for an awesome Cohort dinner at St. Anselm. Some of us had walked there, and on the walk back, my Cohort Judge Ronald Clifford (C.D. Cal.) and I discovered we both worked at Pizza Hut in our earlier days—Judge Clifford in Los Angeles, and me in Washington, Georgia. We had a great laugh, and the others walking back with us enjoyed the Pizza Hut experience banter.

Tuesday, March 22nd – Headed to training to find a group of judges in the hotel lobby:

“Did you read the email?”

“What email?”

“The email that said there was a COVID exposure and telling us not to come in until further notice.”

“Hmmm – must have missed that one.”

I then headed to Union Station and had coffee with Judge Lori Vaughan. Judge Scott Grossman also joined us, and the three of us had a good chat—and likely solved a few of the world’s problems. Afterward, I learned that Judge Elizabeth Gunn (D.C.), the only bankruptcy judge in the D.C. Circuit, volunteered to lead a group of us around the city to the best cherry blossom viewing locations during our break. We caught a great day with a great walk led by Judge Gunn. It was also National Ag Day, so we saw a number of agricultural vendors with various machinery, equipment, and other displays set up on the mall.

Around 12:15 p.m., we were summoned back (approximately another 15,000 steps): class was set to begin at 1:00 p.m. The abbreviated day of training included presentations on implicit bias, security, handling *pro se* cases, and other relevant topics. We closed out with a request that we plan to leave a day early and conclude the following day at noon. That afternoon, I visited the Holocaust Museum for a tour that was made available to the judges during the visit to D.C. I had been there years before, and more recently, I had been to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. This visit to the Holocaust Museum was a reflective, somber visit that spurred many thoughts and emotions (my grandparents on my mom’s side were Holocaust survivors). I then had dinner with a cousin who lives in D.C. who has a baby girl, Adele. It was nice to end a crazy day with family and get to read a bedtime story to Adele.

Wednesday, March 23rd – The weather took a turn for the worse, and we had a half-day of training with more practice rounds with the new judges facing tough challenges. John Cooke, director of the FJC, said a nice goodbye with a story about a sea captain that I won’t repeat here (but will gladly do so in the future). Mr. Cooke

Court Connection
Volume No. 11 – Issue No. 2
April 2022

ended his remarks by noting the importance of being kind (more on that below). Kudos to the FJC and bankruptcy judge faculty for doing a great job in a tough situation.

One of the things I didn't quite realize when I became a judge was how many great resources there are for training. Between the FJC, numerous online resources, and my best resource—my many awesome colleagues—I feel well-poised to take on the challenges ahead.

Final note for now—our Cohort name. Our small but mighty bunch didn't want COVID in our class name. So we decided on something a little different: "The Vonneguts." Why is that? Well, a few reasons. First, the choice was solidified by John Cooke's closing remarks, during which he said, "Be Kind." This was a common Kurt Vonnegut quote and theme. Second, Vonnegut (admittedly not for all) was a supporter of the concept of family and being there for each other. Well, my Cohort is now a family of new judges and will be there for each other as we grow and take on the challenges of the position. Finally, Vonnegut tells a story about how his uncle was someone who insisted on recognizing good times and would often say, "If this isn't nice, what is?" Well, if the honor of our appointments and the privilege to serve as bankruptcy judges isn't nice, I don't know what is. I hope to be able to remember these points day in and out. So, Judge Robson and I are now in the Cohort named "The Vonneguts," and when people ask what that means, we can share the reasons above: Be kind! If this isn't nice, what is? We are a family and there for each other.



Baby judges in front of the United States Capital.



Baby judges in front of the Jefferson Memorial and numerous cherry trees almost in full blossom.

