

Exciting times for Alabama's court system

By Joe Kennedy

Sue Bell Cobb, the next chief justice of Alabama, certainly won't be an ideologue who demagogues and defies the federal courts, like disgraced former Chief Justice Roy Moore. But neither is Cobb likely to lead the state's court system with the quiet efficiency of current Chief Justice Drayton Nabers Jr.

Oh, Cobb will be efficient - she has spent practically her entire adult life as a judge, including the past 12 years on the state Court of Criminal Appeals, so she knows what she's doing and how things work. But Cobb isn't going to be a quiet, low-key chief justice.

"There's a lot to be done," Cobb says, and without much of a pause for breath, she launches into a list of objectives she'll focus on when she takes office Jan. 15:

Increasing the state court system's budget. "We're going to be able to save the state millions of dollars in prison costs if we can get the appropriate (court) budget," Cobb says.

Working to establish nonpartisan elections for judges. "The people want it," she says. "We'll be asking the Legislature to do the right thing, regardless of political consequences."

Completing a revision of the state juvenile justice code. "I and numerous others worked to rewrite the juvenile code," Cobb says. "That will be a very top priority for us during the legislative session."

Still not much of a pause ...

Revising the rules for the Judicial Inquiry Commission and setting up a standing committee on rules governing judicial conduct. "We're going to be asking for new appointments in order to start re-examining the rules," Cobb says.

Establishing drug courts in every Alabama county. "There are only 14 drug courts in the state," she says. "By the time I end my term of six years, we will have 67 drug courts."

Deep breath now? Not yet.

"One thing I haven't talked about at the beginning," Cobb says, "is that we're going to do an extensive survey. We're going to ask every employee in the system, not just the judges, but the users of the system - the DA's, advocates, lawyers, chiefs of police, the people - what are we doing right, what are we doing wrong, what can we do better?"

Anybody who knows Cobb knows these are not empty promises. She is, ahem, supremely qualified for the task she's about to undertake.

Sure, it'll be hard to get nonpartisan election of judges passed by a very partisan Legislature, just as it will be to convince lawmakers that spending at the front end on the court system will save millions of dollars down the road.

However, anybody who a few years ago followed the long battle in the Legislature for money to improve juvenile justice through the Children First programs knows that Cobb is hands-on with the issues she advocates. Cobb will go to the Legislature herself; she's very capable of doing the heavy lifting.

Cobb's determination comes from a desire to serve with distinction and to see Alabama be not just a good place, but a great place to live.

"The enemy of great is good," Cobb says. "I want to be declared the best chief justice we've ever had, which will be hard to do."

Former chief justice and U.S. Sen. Howell Heflin is Cobb's pick as best chief justice up to now. Heflin led an extensive reform of the judicial system in the 1970s which, Cobb says, "made us the envy of other states."

Cobb also is a gracious winner. The fall campaign for chief justice was nothing either Cobb or Nabers can be proud of.

"Unfortunately, it deviated from what we should have focused on, and that was our qualifications," Cobb says. But that's history, she says. Nabers has been "very kind in his expressions and his willingness to help" during the transition.

Cobb has met with the other eight justices, as well, and she says "they have been very welcoming and kind to offer their help and support."

As for being the only Democrat on the Supreme Court, Cobb chuckles. "That's not an issue for me," she says. "I've been the only Democrat for years."

As discouraging as it was a few years ago after Moore became chief justice, Cobb's tenure may be the most uplifting and exciting for the state court system in more than a generation.

"We're going to have a focus, from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top, on how we treat people," Cobb says. "Regardless from where they come, we want people to be treated with dignity, courtesy and fairness."

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