



DEBORAH KIM CHRISTOPHER
DISTRICT JUDGE



TWENTIETH JUDICIAL DISTRICT
STATE OF MONTANA

LAKE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
POLSON, MONTANA 59860
(406) 883-7360

SANDERS COUNTY COURTHOUSE
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The Honorable Mike McGrath
Chief Justice of Montana Supreme Court
Justice Building
215 N. Sanders, Room 414
P.O. Box 203001
Helena, MT 59602-3001

March 15, 2024

Re: Letter of Resignation

Dear Chief Justice McGrath,

It has been my privilege to serve Lake and Sanders Counties in the Twentieth Judicial District for almost 24 years. I still remain awed by the power and authority the citizens in Lake and Sanders counties entrusted to me in electing and reelecting me four separate times. I grew up in Polson but spent a lot of time in Plains and Thompson Falls where my mother, Corinne "Keenie" Cone Christopher grew up and my grandparents, Frances and George Cone lived. When I first returned to Montana, I worked as a deputy Cascade County Attorney in Great Falls where my father, Richard J. Christopher, grew up. Many of my constituents will remember my parents who had Harbour/Hubbard's Pharmacy on Main Street for forty years and my Dad, Dick, who we just lost on Veteran's Day. So, it is especially bittersweet to be tendering my resignation as the District Judge of the Twentieth Judicial District Lake and Sanders Counties, Dept 2 effective April 5, 2024.

I spent almost all of my life as an attorney for the last 36 years in service to my Country and my State. First in the U.S. Army as an Airborne Captain in the Judge Advocate General's Corps. Then to Montana, beginning as deputy Cascade County Attorney. I moved back to Polson from Great Falls to private practice with the now Turnage, Mercer and Wall Law Firm during which I ran and was elected Lake County Attorney for two terms. From my county attorney time, I am the last county attorney to try and successfully prosecute a capital case in 1996 - State vs. Sattler. But nothing is richer than to have been selected as a district judge. As a liberal arts major with honors for my undergraduate degree, I learned how to learn. But never has my education in life and profession been so enriched than how a district judge learns so much about people's lives, professions, qualities, and flaws and sees the law in a totally different way than as an attorney. I was passionate about being a prosecutor. I was compassionate as a judge even with a reputation as a tough judge. I saw the people and no case crossed my desk without my review. Because I reviewed every case set for hearing, I learned the intricacies of each with a focus on each party, the facts as they saw them and the law as I applied it.

As you also know I didn't get it right all the time and I was always thankful to know if I got it wrong, there were seven Supreme Court Justices who would fix it. Given the incredible power held by a district judge with people's lives, children, money, property and futures, the position always weighed heavily on me. I was also the first District Judge in the Twentieth Judicial District who was female and there were not many of us at that time. Perhaps I should have figured it out as I was the ranking female officer at Airborne School at Fort Benning Georgia, the Home of the Infantry. I was one of 25 females out of 750 troops, and I had only been in the Army 3 months. I hardly knew how to put on my uniform or who to salute, but a lot of push-ups helped, and some kind Noncommissioned Officers. I was also the first female Lake County Attorney. I do not share that as a feminist but because it was so critical to me to do it right, so I did not wreck it for the next girl coming along in my path.

One particular case still burns in my brain, not ahead of the others but due to the utter disrespect of the value of human lives. When the Hyundai case happened, it began with an overly emotional attorney who did not get what her clients deserved. I begged the parties to join Hyundai so we would not have an "empty chair" in the Courtroom. That case, my incredible special master Michael Viscomi and the attorneys who took on a corporation that had fifty-two billion dollars in net assets, allowed the jury to send the message that three Montana lives mattered when the jury found for special damages in the amount of \$240,000,000. I still am a little in awe that I presided over that case. It was the fifth largest verdict in the country at the time.

Perhaps the project of which I am most proud is the project my Judicial Assistant Rose Bridenstine and I started immediately upon me becoming a judge. I wanted to build a CASA [Court Appointed Special Advocate] program. As a soldier, prosecutor, defense counsel, family law attorney, and District Judge, there was no greater need than to protect the children who came into our legal world. They are the only truly innocent people in the Courtroom and have the least ability to protect themselves. The CASA program is currently in place with a solid fund raiser in support which now covers both Lake and Sanders Counties and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Reservation.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve. The Sergeant Major of the U.S. Army JAG Corps told me I was "the most idealist lawyer [he] knew...." He made me promise "Don't ever lose these ideals no matter what the price". I paid the price, but I kept the promise. Having "Judge" as a first name has been an honor and a privilege. I am grateful for the time, the support of the citizens, the custodians who got me in my locked office and all the personnel in the judicial branch, most especially my Judicial Assistants Shari Puryer and LeeAnn Erickson and my law clerks. I will miss you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Kim Christopher
District Judge