

BUSINESS PROFILE

The 20th Circuit's chief judge, a fourth-generation SWFL native

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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There are no windows in Chief Judge G. Keith Cary's chambers, but it's roomy and comfortably furnished with an expansive wooden desk and dark shelves filled with law books. As a circuit judge, he presides over a part-time docket of domestic violence cases. A few black robes hang by a door at the back of the office, which leads into his courtroom on the fourth floor of the Lee County Justice Center.

Judge Cary is also the chief judge of the 20th Judicial Circuit of Florida. It's a position his colleagues elected him to for a two-year term. As the chief, he is the main administrative officer, business manager and spokesperson for 50 judges and 380 employees in Lee, Collier, Hendry, Glades and Charlotte counties. Recently, he was elected to a second term that begins July 1.

His latest challenge has been stretching a yearly budget of roughly \$30 million, not enough to hire new judges or employees, he says, even though "our caseload has shot up dramatically." That includes a large number of foreclosure cases, which skyrocketed because of the housing bust. His work also includes appointments both social and professional, such as attending funerals, court meetings and Bar Association luncheons.

"Part of the rule of being chief judge is being a representative of the court system," he says. "I'm basically the face of the judges."

On any given day — he checks his

computer to see what's coming up — Judge Cary could be on a state-wide conference call about budget and personnel issues or hosting a tour of the new 165,000-square-foot addition to the Lee County Justice Center for Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp. Although his daily routine includes checking his e-mail first thing in the morning, around 8:30 a.m., no day is typical.

"I have a typical day that always gets interrupted by an emergency from somewhere," he says, an example might be getting the phone service and air conditioning up and running in the Lee Justice Center's new building.

Judge Cary, 55, is a fourth-generation native of Lee County. His relatives settled east of Fort Myers near Alva in the early 1900s, where they ran a sawmill and a 600-acre cattle ranch. The ranch existed for more than 80 years in North Olga before most of the land was sold. "Throughout my childhood, I'd go out there and work on weekends with my dad in the summer," Judge Cary said. Both his parents are still alive and live in Lee County. His father used to work in the trust department of the old First National Bank in downtown Fort Myers.

Judge Cary attended Edison Park Elementary school and later Fort Myers High School, while working at a Publix grocery store. He also met his wife, Robbi, at Fort Myers High. They have three boys, ages 19, 20 and 21.

With their sons all in college, the Carys were empty nesters until another daily emergency occurred, but this time not a



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Chief Judge G. Keith Cary

small one. His brother died last year at age 50, and his 19-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son now live with Keith and Robbi Cary in Alva.

Judge Cary had planned to be a banker when he went to college. And before that, he wanted to be a forest ranger — a result, he speculates, of loving outdoors work on the ranch as a youth. But both professions required more math and science courses than he liked, so he opted for law school.

After graduating from the University of South Florida in Tampa with a bachelor's in business administration, he attended the Cumberland School of Law at Sam-

ford University, where he made the Academic Dean's List. Returning to Lee County, he became the assistant state attorney for two years before practicing real-estate law and commercial litigation for a private firm.

In 1988, he won a seat as a county court judge in Lee County. But he says his most exciting professional moment came in 1999, when Gov. Jeb Bush appointed him as a circuit court judge in LaBelle, where he presided over Hendry and Glades counties. Four years later, he came back.

"Lee County is home," he says.

Meanwhile, he has been deputy director of the yearly Edison Festival Grand Parade of Light for 18 years, and is a well-known figure around downtown Fort Myers. Sometimes for lunch, he says, "we'll walk down to the French Connection or over to the Oasis and half

the time we stop and talk to somebody."

In his office, there is a picture of the 20th Circuit judges from 1978, which he pulled off the shelf, naming the group and remembering when they retired. A few, like him, are still around. With seven years until retirement, Judge Cary plans to continue his work as the Circuit's chief judge and a circuit judge.

"(Being a judge) is a very exciting job," he says. "It's a very important job because you're involved in people's lives so you have to be on your game every day. Each day, each case, is different." ■

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