

## PRESIDENT JUDGE SUSAN SCOTT

*Nancy Larkin Taylor*

Susan Devlin Scott had no master plan to be Bucks County President Judge, but, in retrospect, the steps that led to her current position, as the first woman to serve as the President Judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County, seem logical.

Judge Scott graduated from Temple with a BA in Biology. Hoping to teach on a college level, she sought a PhD in Microbiology. After she completed the necessary course work, she discovered the scarcity of available college teaching positions and cringed at the idea of spending her days in a lonely laboratory.

So, after the birth of her son Bill, Judge Scott's husband suggested she apply to law school. Scoring high on the LSAT, she enrolled at Temple at night. Her course selection was dictated by the schedule of her fellow law student with whom she commuted from Bucks County. Judge Scott was born with a strong pragmatic streak.

After graduation, realizing what was required to make partner in a large center city firm, Judge Scott jumped at the chance to practice with a law school friend in Bucks County. For 15 years, she practiced family law at Pine & Court, many of those years with former master in divorce, Kathryn Carlson.

A Democrat, Judge Scott was elected to the bench in 1989. Initially, she sat in Family Court. As her judicial assignments became more diverse, with her natural curiosity and quick grasp of facts, she smoothly developed expertise in other areas, including zoning, real estate and general civil matters. Judge Scott flourished in her new environment, enjoying the camaraderie of fellow judges, an element lacking in solo practice. Judge Scott became known statewide as a practical, compassionate jurist, with a holistic view of litigants' circumstances. On the bench, she listens intensely to and studiously observes those who testify, deftly getting to the heart of the case with her pointed questions.

Among members of the Bar, P.J. Scott is well respected for her knowledge, preparedness and dry wit. The latter is exemplified by her courtroom "pet hates." Never touch the jury box, hover near the witness, begin an address to the court with the phrase "With all due respect" or begin a cross examination question with "Would it surprise you to learn?" Otherwise, you face a pox on both your houses.

Judge Scott's executive skills surfaced for the first time when in 1998 she was appointed to the Court Budget Committee, which she has chaired since 2001. She cites this experience as her "P.J. In Training." Her involvement on this committee provided Judge Scott with a crash course in court administration. She became familiar with the various departments under the court's purview, including Juvenile and Adult Probation, the Youth Development Center, the Law Library and the District Justice system. Pouring over detailed account statements, talking to department heads, Judge Scott gained an insider's view of the system, understanding how and why Bucks County spends \$65 million per year on its courts.

Judge Scott still spends every September and October crunching numbers and dissecting budget requests, balancing the court check book and tracking department spending. She views herself as "half bean counter, half social worker." She enjoys a friendly relationship with the commissioners, but as the taxing authority with the power to veto court expenditures, she acknowledges the natural tension between the two branches.

From Budget Committee Chair, it was a natural progression for her to be elected P.J. by her fellow judges, a position she likens to being CEO of a 600-person corporation. She sees herself as the overseer of the delivery of judicial services to her constituency, the Bucks County taxpayers. Her philosophy and work ethic reflects a commitment to do so in the most efficient manner.

The Bucks County court calendar is a collaborative effort. Unlike other courts, judges here do not run their own calendars. If a judge finishes early, he or she will seek out other cases. While P.J./CEO Scott does assign the cases, she views herself as working with 12 very independent vice presidents of equal rank. Each judge remains firmly in charge of his or her own courtroom.

For the next four years of Judge Scott's five-year term as President Judge, most of her time and energy will be devoted to the development of the new Justice Center. Since elected, she has met with project managers, architects, designers, court administrators and the Board of Judges to help design a center which will effectively and economically meet the future needs of the courts and the people of Bucks County.

While individual judges may disagree about

the placement of handrails, the security of corridors or the choice of furniture in the new center, one issue upon which they are unanimous is the clustering of judicial chambers to assure and invite collegiality. Proximal office placement allows for informal and daily interaction, according to P.J. Scott. Judges enjoy mulling over decisions, thinking aloud, measuring feedback. Physical isolation in the courthouse would render this impossible.

Besides attending meetings almost daily, Judge Scott's new position requires her to speak frequently to various groups, such as the Bucks County Police Chiefs, the Leadership Forum, the Chamber of Commerce, the Criminal Justice Advisory Board, and the Prison Committee, to name a few, and this is not her favorite pastime.

Judge Scott, however, is quite comfortable with newfangled electronic courtroom technology. In a recent civil trial, an architect testified live from a Virginia conference center -- an experience Judge Scott described as "fabulous" since it saved so much time and money. She will not, however, allow attorney-to-judge emailing without strict ground rules, although it is the communication method of choice for intra-courthouse personnel. She particularly enjoys the lively debates among other president judges on their list serve.

In spite of her lofty position, Judge Scott continues to sit in Family Court and remains approachable, honestly telling attorneys how she sees their cases with the manner of a concerned friend, especially when she disagrees with your stance. The Bench, the Bar and Bucks County citizens are all fortunate that Judge Scott opted for a never-planned-for career in public service.

