

New IJC head wants to ‘make justice just’



By Marc Karlinsky
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The incoming chair of the Illinois Judicial Council, an association that represents Black judges, says the state of affairs in 2020 amplifies the importance of his organization’s core mission.

Cook County Judge Thaddeus L. Wilson, who will be sworn in during the IJC’s virtual installation on Thursday night, said the theme of his upcoming remarks and throughout his term will be “making justice just.”

“Justice isn’t just for the majority, justice isn’t just for a minority, justice is a concept,” Wilson said. “It is not something that is just automatic. If it were automatic, then we wouldn’t have to say ‘equal justice,’ because justice would just *be* equal.”

It’s something to be made and upheld, he explained.

“We have to do things that make it just for everyone, and not for those who scream the loudest, not for those who are the richest or for those who are just the poorest. No — it has to be just for everyone.”

In a year marked by a pandemic, court disruptions, economic distress and protests of systemic racism, Wilson said the IJC’s approach and positions hold firm: striving for equal access to the courts, serving as role models for youth and encouraging a more diverse bench and bar.

“It only amplifies why we believe it is so important,” he said. “When you see all the social unrest — obviously a lot of that, the judiciary can’t comment on directly. But we are part of the community, and while we can’t pander to any one side, it is important for us to know exactly what’s going on.”

The Illinois Supreme Court appointed Wilson to the circuit court in 2007, and he was elected to his first full term in 2010. He’s assigned as a supervising judge in the circuit court’s Criminal Division, where he hears felony cases at the Leighton Criminal Court Building.

He additionally teaches criminal procedure and election law at UIC John Marshall Law School.

Before joining the bench, Wilson practiced law at Brookins & Wilson P.C. alongside 21st Ward Ald. Howard B. Brookins Jr.

As a lawyer, Wilson was a hearing examiner for the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners and arbitrated cases for the circuit court’s mandatory arbitration program.

Before attending law school at Northern Illinois University, the South Carolina native earned a business degree at University of Notre Dame in management information systems.

That tech background landed him in Chicago, where he worked for three years as a computer programmer and systems analyst for Joseph T. Ryerson & Son Inc., a major metals distributor, at its plant in Douglas Park.

In his 13 years as a judge, the state judiciary has tapped him regularly for his technological savvy. The high court nominated Wilson to complete a fellowship with the Advanced Science and Technology Adjudication Resource (ASTAR), now known as the National Courts and Sciences Institute.

He's served on the Supreme Court's e-Business Policy Advisory Board since 2015. As part of the court-appointed Illinois Judicial Conference, Wilson sits on the Weighted Caseload Task Force and previously served on its committees studying complex litigation, automation and technology.

"And then I'm on the technical committees for the Criminal Division on a new system that we were trying to get rolled out," he said. "And I teach at the Judicial Education Conference on technology issues and the courts."

And away from his court call, Wilson said he's been working into the night at home "working on a lot of the technical aspects" with the vendor producing Thursday's IJC event.

"I guess COVID landed on the person with the technical ability," Wilson said with a chuckle.

Wilson said the IJC has transitioned to socially distant programs "kind of on the fly just like everybody else."

And web-based programs this year will try to meet judges' needs at the moment, like the Zoom videoconferencing service where most court business has taken place since March.

"We are going to be doing training specifically on various features," Wilson said, including Zoom's language interpretation and closed caption settings.

"Those things are now very much germane," he said. "They're still part of our core in terms of education and issues important for the judiciary — but now there's a little twist."

Wilson also said the IJC is organizing programs on "the road to the robe," sharing mentorship to lawyers who may one day consider becoming judges.

"People need to know the stories of the people who lead before them. How they got on the bench, the trials and tribulations of running for judge or going through the associate process. That's important information," Wilson said. "It's surprising — even when I got on the bench, the judges who I saw were judges for years. I had no clue how long it took them, how many times it took them, to run, to go through the associate process. And so we like to try to do that type of communication with the bar before the campaign season starts in earnest, so that we're out of the political realm."

The 38th annual IJC installation and scholarship awards ceremony is at 7 p.m. on Sept 10 via Zoom, and pre-registration is required at illinoisjudicialcouncil.org.

In addition to Wilson's installation as president, the following IJC officers will be sworn in: Cook County Circuit Judge Bonita Coleman as president-elect, Cook County Circuit Judge Steven Gregory Watkins as secretary, Cook County Associate Judge Allen Price Walker as assistant secretary, Cook County Associate Judge Kevin T. Lee as treasurer, and Cook County Circuit Judge Kimberly D. Lewis as assistant treasurer.

The other IJC board members being sworn in are Cook County Circuit Judges Tiana Shanae Blakely, Toya T. Harvey, William H. Hooks, Dominique C. Ross and Freddrenna M. Lyle. Lyle, the IJC's 2019-20 president, will serve as an ex-officio member.