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Law professionals support new court

Discussion of peacekeeping court opens with 'smudging ceremony'

BY JO MATHIS
Legal News

It's not every day that you walk into a Washtenaw County courtroom to find one judge asking the spirits to remove negative energy from another judge as the scent of burning herbs fills the air.

But that's what happened in the courtroom of Washtenaw County Trial Court Judge Timothy Connors recently when a Michigan tribal judge showed up to talk about efforts to start a peacekeeping court here.

Judge Angela Sherigan, a tribal judge for Little River Band of Ottawa Indians in Manistee, first conducted a

"smudging" ceremony before a packed courtroom of law professionals before presenting Connors with an award for his support of Native Americans.

Tribal courts use peacekeeping courts for dispute resolution, and Sherigan and Connors have collaborated on an initiative that would bring the concept of peacekeeping courts into family court.

There are always two sides to every story, Sherigan said.

"Underneath those legal issues, there's something deeper," she said. "Usually that's not addressed in the adversarial system ... In the peacekeeping court, those things are addressed."

"The most important thing is to get support from the administration," she said, adding that Washtenaw County is lucky to have in Connors a judge willing to take the lead.

Several guests spoke in support of some kind of peacekeeping efforts in the county.

Cooley Associate Dean Joan

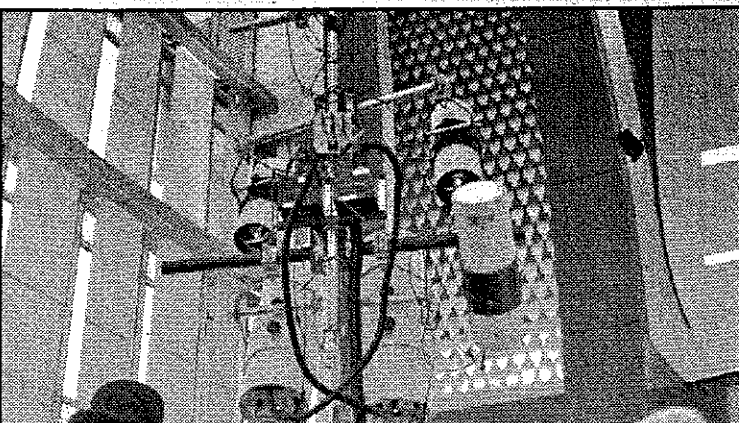
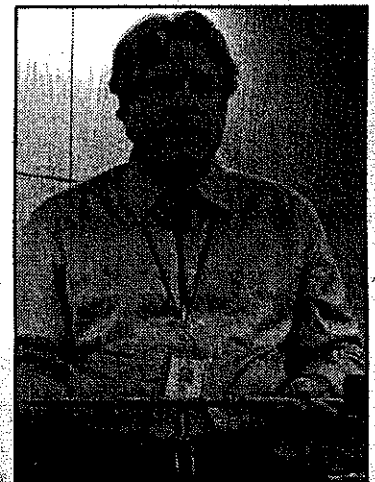
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Judge Angela Sherigan, a tribal judge for Little River Band of Ottawa Indians in Manistee, conducts a "smudging" ceremony in which herbs are burned and then fanned with a feather to burn away any negativity in the room.

At right, Judge Timothy Connors receives an award—a pipe with a bear symbolizing peace and courage—for his support of Native Americans.

Photos by Jo Mathis



Attorney has his eye on the 2012 ArtPrize

Steve Rich's focus is laser-like at international art competition

terns with their movements.

Attorney Steve Rich of Ann Arbor is the legal counsel of Team Stratus 10. Beyond that, he sums up his role as "head schlepper, PR and marketing functionary, co-visionary, roadie, tech

Restorative justice model praised

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Vestrand talked of visiting the Red Hook Community Justice Center's court in Brooklyn, N.Y., and called it the most amazing experience of her legal career.

She said she learned that the neighborhood had been one of the most dangerous areas of New York City until the establishment of that court based on restorative justice principles.

When she came to work in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area, she decided to start a student court in Ypsilanti High School based on the same principles of restorative justice in the way she'd seen in Red Hook. Students go before a jury of their peers trained by law students.

"The feedback has been phenomenal," she said.

Vestrand said she's thrilled by the thought that a restorative justice model could come to Washtenaw County.

"I've seen firsthand that this does work in the state system," she said. "It changes people."

Bridget Mary McCormack, associate dean at the University of Michigan Law School, said law students and faculty would be great partners in making restorative justice a real success locally.

"Law students believe anything's possible still," she said.

Judge Darlene O'Brien said

more so we can implement this and help our residents."

Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Douglas Shapiro said that the most difficult part of his job is how often he feels he's a "cog in a human eating machine."

"So whatever I can do in my role in the Appeals Court or in my service in various judges committees to help run interference, I'd be delighted," he said.

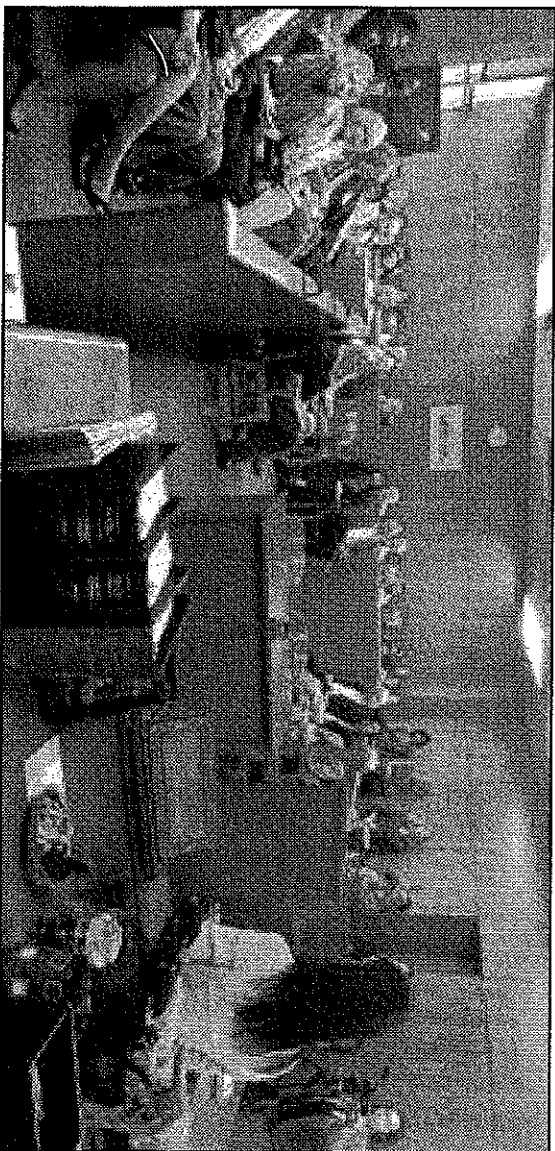
After the meeting, which was sponsored by The Women Lawyers Association of Michigan and the Washtenaw County Bar Association's Family Law Section, Connors noted that "all the ingredients are here."

"So now we take the ingredients and see what we can put together," he said. "I'll be interesting to see what we can put together and get assistance as a pilot project."

Connors said he assumes he'd be the judge of such a court, but he's noted interest from other judges, as well.

Connors, whose interest in Native American culture is well known in the county, keeps a bag of sacred medicines on his bench. He's also added two pieces of the Berlin Wall as a reminder that—"no matter what walls are built between humans, we have the medicine to tear those walls down."

Teresa Killen, a judicial



Tribal Court Judge Angela K. Sherigan, past state president of WLAM, speaks to law professionals about the possibility of bringing peacemaking courts into family courts.

At right, Sherigan performs Native American rituals prior to presenting Judge Connors with the American Indian Law Section's Tecumseh Peacemaking Award given to a law professional who has demonstrated advocacy and integrity on behalf of Native peoples.



Photos by Jo Mathis

thing's possible start, she said.

Judge Darlene O'Brien said that after six years as a family court judge, she realizes the need for a peacekeeping concept.

"Families are broken," she said. "Individuals are broken. And if there's anything we can do to help bring peace and healing, I wholeheartedly endorse that. I know that the student resolution helps, and the restorative justice concept helps. And I'm looking forward to learning

Teresa Killeen, a judicial attorney at Washtenaw County Probate Court, said the cross-section of people at the meeting shows great momentum for the initiative.

"Any time you can do something that makes an entire room of lawyers absolutely silent, it's an accomplishment!" said Killeen. "When Judge Sherigan was smudging, you could have heard a pin drop."