Eddie C. Sturgeon
Eddie Sturgeon, a civil court judge, has also served as dean of the California Judicial College.

By Pat Broderick
SAN DIEGO - For Superior Court Judge Eddie Sturgeon, having served as the dean of the California Judicial College is among his proudest achievements.

"I've been able to lead judicial education in the state of California," said Sturgeon, who served as dean in 2009 and 2010. "I enjoy teaching new judges tremendously."

While busy with a heavy load of civil cases at the main courthouse in downtown San Diego, Sturgeon still finds time to teach through the Center for Judiciary Education and Research and the California Judges Association.

"We have about 100 new judges a year," he said. "One day you're an attorney, the next day, 'I get a robe. Now what do I do?'

Among the biggest obstacles new judges face is that, "Sometimes when you put the robe on, you think you have to know everything," said Sturgeon, who added he isn't shy about asking for help.

"A lot of times, even today, the attorneys who appear in front of me know more than me, because this is all they practice," he said. "Don't be afraid to let the attorneys educate you on their field. They will be more than happy to help you."

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State Supreme Court Justice Carol A. Corrigan, who has taught at the California Judicial College with Sturgeon for many years, joked, "Being dean of the judges' college is like organizing a sack full of snakes."
"There are a thousand moving parts and a whole lot of brand new people coming to the profession and they don't want to look stupid," she said.

Corrigan gives Sturgeon top grades for his efforts.

"When you're dean, you have to juggle all of that, along with the big brains on the faculty, and make everybody happy for two weeks. That is virtually impossible."

A native San Diegan, Sturgeon said he knew from the age of 6 - when he was running about the house in a little suit and briefcase - that he wanted to be a lawyer.

That goal inspired him all the way to University of Santa Clara School of Law. After he graduated in 1973, Sturgeon found work with Tolman & Lorello, a San Diego law firm that had specialized in civil cases.

"They were just starting a criminal department," he added. "I was the new attorney on the block, so I started doing all the criminal defense cases."

While Sturgeon also did some civil cases, he said, "I really fell in love with criminal, because you're in the courtroom so much more. I wanted to be a trial lawyer."

When he struck out on his own in 1980, Sturgeon handled mostly criminal defense cases with a sprinkling of personal injury disputes thrown into the mix.

"I was in the courtroom every day trying cases," he said. "That's where I lived."

While he relished his life as a trial attorney, Sturgeon started thinking about a new challenge when a couple of judges he knew suggested that he consider the bench.

He applied and, in 1988, Sturgeon was appointed to the municipal court by Gov. George Deukmejian.

Noting that the governor tended to favor prosecutors for judicial appointments, Sturgeon considered himself fortunate.

"I think I had a good reputation with the D.A.s as a straight shooter," he said. "Your reputation is so important in this profession."

In 1998, Sturgeon was elevated by unification to the Superior Court.

In 2007, Sturgeon was among 27 judges assigned by Chief Justice Ronald M. George to help ease the heavy backlog of criminal cases at Riverside County.

Once there, Sturgeon said he was shocked to discover how hard a hit the right to a speedy trial had taken.

"I almost fell off the bench," he recalled about one particular session in Riverside. "You've been in custody for how long and you haven't had a trial? This is the United States of America, people. We don't do that here."

He added, "I pumped some work out of that place, and we did a good job up there."

Despite his heavy caseload, Sturgeon has continued to stay involved in a program called "Every 15 Minutes," which dramatizes for students throughout the county the tragedy of drunk driving.

"I get a lot of feedback from parents," he added. "It's a dynamite program."

Robert G. Knaier, a partner at Chapin Fitzgerald LLP, has represented both plaintiffs and defendants in a variety of matters before Sturgeon.

"He is consistently well-versed in the facts and the law, and always gives each side of a dispute fair consideration," Knaier said. "I am regularly impressed by the care he gives to each case, his acknowledgement of the concerns of all involved, and his efforts to decide matters in thoughtful, creative ways."
Randall L. Brownwood, a partner with Austin, Brownwood, Cannon & Santa Cruz, credits Sturgeon for his demeanor.

"He has a sense of humor that makes it easy to be in his court," Brownwood said. "Sometimes he makes a decision that appears to be the most reasonable and fair, rather than strictly according to the law."

George Brewster, chief deputy county counsel, said "[Sturgeon] truly listens to each side and then makes the call - including the tough calls as warranted."

Meanwhile, Sturgeon is contending with the dwindling of resources plaguing judges throughout the state.

He recently transferred to downtown San Diego from his longtime courthouse in El Cajon after the civil department and other services were funneled to the main courthouse.

"We had to do it because we got whacked millions," Sturgeon said. "It's horrible, and it's not fair to the citizens that have to drive all the way to downtown. The Legislature has to start understanding, I would hope."

But for all of that, Sturgeon said that he continues to be energized and loves being a judge.

"I've got some huge cases that are coming up," he added, "and I can't wait to try them."

Here are some of Judge Sturgeon's recent cases and the lawyers involved:

Hidden Valley Ranch v. Ramona Municipal Water District, 2010-65606 - water dispute

For the plaintiff: Manuel Corrales Jr., San Diego
For the defendant: Melissa Woo, San Diego

Lane v. Bell, 2011-67396 - property dispute

For the plaintiff: Ross E. Veta, Veta & Veta, San Diego
For the defendant: Teresa Trucchi, Suppa Trucchi & Henein LLP, San Diego

Hidden v. Brunelle Family Trust, 2011-68186 - land dispute

For the plaintiff: Manuel De La Torre, Los Angeles
For the defendant: J. Robert O'Connor, O'Connor & Packer APC, San Diego

Jellison v. Freymiller, 2010-65496 - wrongful death

For the plaintiff: Robert G. Knaier, Chapin Fitzgerald LLP, San Diego
For the defendant: George W. Brewster Jr., county counsel's office; Scott D. Schabacker, San Diego; Randall L. Brownwood, Austin, Brownwood, Cannon & Santa Cruz, San Diego

Harris v. Cajon Valley Union School District, 2011-66665 - trip/fall

For the plaintiff: Harry Harrison, Harrison & Bodell LLP, San Diego
For the defendant: Jennifer Creighton, Wines Patrick Gayer Creighton & Hanes, Vista

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