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## Judge Gerald W. Heaney: A Multi-Generational Mentor

Joseph T. Dixon, Jr.\*

Joseph T. Dixon III\*\*

In 1969, the Dixon family moved to Duluth, Minnesota, unknowingly embarking on an adventure that has already spanned two generations and two clerkships with Judge Heaney. Little did we know then that what began as a great job opportunity for someone fresh out of law school would evolve into a relationship that has left its indelible mark on our entire family. For us, Gerald W. Heaney is a caring and compassionate judge, a demanding but appreciative employer, a visionary and inclusive mentor, and, most of all, a warm and dear friend.

Two of the Dixons have had the privilege of joining the family of Heaney law clerks, albeit a generation apart. As members of that family, we have been his frequent luncheon companions and office confidants. He has sought our opinions on a wide range of topics, and has freely shared his views with us. Along with the other members of this law clerk family, we share a unique perspective from which we have seen the Judge act on his values and beliefs in his every day life and work.

Much has changed in the twenty-six years that separated our two clerkships. Judge Heaney has gone from one of the newest members of the court, when he was just emerging as one of its leaders, to a Senior Judge who has relinquished some of the more tangible aspects of his leadership. The courts and the country as a whole have undergone profound and dramatic change over this period. What has remained the same, however, are the fundamental commitments, passions, and principles that drive the Judge and the energy, good-humor, and love that he brings to his work and his life.

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Despite his stature as a federal judge, a position that carries with it trappings of power and status, the Judge maintains the values that he learned as a boy growing up in rural Minnesota during the Depression, as a soldier in World War II, and as a labor lawyer in northeastern Minnesota. First and foremost in the Judge's view of the world are the importance of community, our obligation to better it, and the unyielding belief that it can be improved through our individual and cooperative efforts. Whether the community is the Judge's hometown of Goodhue, his adopted home of Duluth, the State of Minnesota, or the country as a whole, there is always something that needs to be bettered, and which can be bettered only if we act.

This starting point of community leads naturally into the Judge's passion for and willingness to fight on behalf of the rights of the disadvantaged. It is no accident that the title of the bound volume of some of the Judge's more important judicial opinions is *For the Least of These*.<sup>1</sup> The Judge clearly views himself, the courts, and each of us as our brother's keeper. One reviewing Heaney opinions will find eloquent and impassioned advocacy for the rights of the disadvantaged, the down-trodden, and the little people of society. The Judge never loses sight of what he sees as the true societal import of the law: the ability of government and its judicial institutions to care for and protect its citizens.

Judge Heaney treats everyone, irrespective of position, power, or wealth, with dignity, respect, and caring. This quality is nowhere better demonstrated than by the Judge's sincere and well-known love of children. Over the course of many years, we enjoyed a unique position from which to observe and benefit from the love and devotion that the Judge and his wife Eleanor shower on children. From card games with five-year-olds, to fishing with preteens, to animated conversation with teenagers, the Judge was never too busy or too important to take time with young people, relishing the opportunity to share their energy, interests, and joy.

Finally, the Judge brings to all of his endeavors a wonderful capacity and contagious enthusiasm for hard work. After a particularly long day or upon the completion of a difficult opinion, the Judge will often tell his clerks a story from his boyhood that embodies the spirit of his drive. The story is

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1. Judge Gerald W. Heaney, *For the Least of These* (Dec. 1966) (on file with author).

about his father. Judge Heaney's father, a farmer and butcher, rented some of his land to other farmers. One year, one of the tenant farmers could not harvest the crop due to an illness. So the Judge's father told the Judge that they would go over to the field the next day to bring in the crop for the farmer. At that time, the Judge's father was getting on in years, and his son looked forward to the prospect of an easy day. The next day, they brought two teams of horses and proceeded to work from dawn to dark, switching teams occasionally to give the horses a break, but barely taking time for lunch. Throughout the day, the young son looked over to his father for signs of fatigue; the glances increased in frequency as the day grew on. He saw none. At the end of the day, after accomplishing far more than the Judge had thought possible, the two walked home together. The Judge's father put his arm around his weary son and said, "Well, Gerry, we didn't do much today, but we'll give 'em hell tomorrow."

For our family, and the entire family of Heaney clerks, the Judge has been a truly wonderful role model and mentor. On this celebration of his thirty years as a federal jurist, we hope that he continues to provide his guidance and counsel to his clerks and his community for years to come.

