



Legal history was made on the North Slope last week when Mike Jeffrey, a Barrow resident, became the first Superior Court Judge of Barrow. Jeffrey is well known for his participation in community events, such as Eskimo dancing and singing in Inupiat. Above, he sings at his own swearing-in ceremony with the Presbyterian children's choir. At right, Jeffrey wields his new gavel.

Barrow judge sworn in

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times

The new superior court judge in Barrow eats maktak, performs with one of the top Eskimo dance groups in the state, sings hymns in Inupiat in a local church choir, and is entering his job with a strong show of support from the community.

When Mike Jeffrey was sworn in last Friday, he became the first rural resident in state history to receive so high a judicial title in a rural area, said Supreme Court Justice Jay A. Rabinowitz who presided over the ceremonies. The ceremony was held in the

youth center.

"Mike has a strong commitment to our people up here," North Slope Borough Mayor Eugene Brower praised. "He knows our people, how they believe, their lifestyle." Brower said the people of Barrow and the outlying villages feel "they have a fair judge here, one that will understand their needs."

Nate Olemaun, Jr., Mayor of the City of Barrow, also praised the new judge. "He's one of the few non-Native people who can put us to shame," Olemaun said, pointing out Jeffrey's ability to dance the traditional dances

and sing in Inupiat. "It's nice to have someone up here who understands our culture . . . who will serve our needs, not only for the people up here, but for the state."

Sadie Neakok, a former Magistrate of Barrow, recalled when Jeffrey came to the community seven years ago as a young attorney intent on establishing an Alaska Legal Services office. "He came freshly from California, all the way to the top of the world," recalled Neakok, praising him for the determination and enthusiasm he showed. Housing was scarce in Barrow then, even as it is now.

"With this great heart given me by the Lord, I couldn't see Mike stay out in the cold," Neakok remembered. "I let Mike use the court . . . he slept in the jury box!"

Neakok cautioned Jeffrey that the judge's role sometimes would prove hard. "It isn't easy, as you know," she told Jeffrey. "We're all there. The court system is there . . . when you make a mistake, there's no need to panic!"

After Jeffrey was sworn in, he assured the audience that he understood that difficulty as well as honor accompanied the job. In fact, he said, he

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Tough decisions await new judge

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went through a great deal of indecision and soul-searching before he even decided to apply for the judgeship.

A judge is alone on the bench, Jeffrey explained, and is faced with the responsibility of making the best decision he can in matters which greatly affect peoples' lives. "Are people going to treat me different?" Jeffrey recalled some of the doubts which troubled him prior to his decision to apply. "Will my friends go away . . . will people get mad at me?"

Jeffrey also looked at the other side. "If I didn't apply, there would be no one who had lived on the North Slope for any length of time who would (apply). They would have to bring in a judge from an outside community."

Charlotte Brower, who, like Neakok, once served as a Barrow magistrate, had seen many problems with having out-of-town judges. With Jeffrey as the new judge, these problems are now history, she said.

Jeffrey plans to continue with his dancing, singing, and other community activities, although he admits he will not be able to travel with the Barrow Dancers to distant locations as freely as he once did. Despite the doubts, Jeffrey looks forward to the future.

"I just think that we have an opportunity on the North Slope to pull this off. We are blessed with back-up resources here which not all other regions of the state have. We have a small number of villages. It is the kind of situation you can deal with. It is not overwhelming. We have police officers in every village."

And, thanks to the work Jeffrey began for Alaska Legal Services, there are paralegals in every village. Jeffrey would like the court system to become more visible in the villages. Although he feels it would be impractical in many cases to hold hearings in the villages, he believes it may often be possible to conduct sentencing in the villages.

There is a growing interest in teleconferencing in the region, and this could possibly be worked into future court proceedings as well, said Jeffrey.

Although former Governor Jay Hammond made the final decision to appoint Jeffrey as judge, he did so largely because

the public made it known they wanted someone local as the judge.

Jeffrey credits State Sen. Frank Ferguson of Kotzebue with seeing to it that Hammond heard the pleas of the North Slope people.

"There's a feeling, that even though you're alone, you're there partly because the people have said, 'yes, that's a good thing!'" Jeffrey noted.

It also will be up to the

people whether he stays. They will vote whether to keep him when his first term expires.

"You saw me take an oath to support the Constitution of the United States and the State of Alaska," Jeffrey told those gathered. "I am sworn to follow state laws." He noted that if someone appeared in front of him, someone that he knew well, and that person had been found guilty by a jury, he

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Barrow judge

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would have to sentence him or her according to the law.

Jeffrey's parents, John Jeffrey, Sr., and Marion, and his brother, John Jr., traveled from Los Angeles, Calif. to attend the ceremony.

Although their son is far away from home in a land extremely different from their own, the Jeffreys said they have never been upset by his chosen lifestyle. "We know it's what he wants, and we're very proud of him," said Mrs. Jeffrey. "He's been far away a lot. At least in Alaska, we can talk to him on the phone." During the seven years he spent in India phone conversations were seldom possible.

"We have been given a great opportunity as parents to witness a great occasion for our son," John Sr. added. "Being able to come up here into the Arctic, seeing how people here live, how Mike's been living, and the conditions that He's been living in, has been great. We are so lucky as parents."

"I'm just very, very proud of him," said his brother, John. "I think he's very fortunate to live among so many warm

people in such a cold place."

Although Jeffrey has been given the nickname "Maktak Mike" by the people of Kaktovik and is known throughout the region as being a lover of Native foods, he was a vegetarian when he first came to the North. "It didn't work," he said, "I found I was cold all the time." He observed the culture of the Inupiat people, listened to the advice of the Elders, and finally decided "that I need the food the Lord put in this place to survive."

Also taking part in the ceremony was Simeon Patkotak, Sr., who offered the invocation, the Honorable Charles Tunley, Presiding Superior Court Judge of the Second Judicial District; the Honorable John Hanson, retired Kenai Superior Court Judge; John M. Holmes and Linda Wingenback of Alaska Legal Services.

Heather Noble, of the Anchorage Legal Services, presented Jeffrey with his first gavel.

Ernest Kignak offered the benediction. "Don't forget the man who sits above you," Kignak advised Jeffrey "... that will help you to do your work."