

# Take time in 2022 to build up relationships with your courts

There are so many things in our lives COVID disrupted. But one that was significant to me was an ongoing effort in Kansas City involving the media and the judges in our five-county metro area. For many years — 10? more? — our media lawyers group of the Metro Kansas City Bar Association has hosted a breakfast once or twice a year, inviting members of the media to sit down over coffee with judges in Kansas and Missouri and just talk about issues of concern.

For the judges, it helped to put names with faces and to establish personal connections with folks in the newsroom to call if an issue developed in terms of actions in a courtroom (or outside the courtroom — one impetus was a situation where a reporter and cameraman showed up at a judge's front door seeking a comment about a case).

For the media, it helped them to understand what happens in a courtroom, why it happens, and how to develop a working relationship with a judge so when the need arose to seek to put a camera in the courtroom, the judge knew the reporter and could have a higher level of trust that the reporter was going to behave professionally in terms of the request.

Those breakfasts ceased almost two years ago. But this week, I began thinking about them again.

In Kenosha, Wisconsin, according to a report from the Associated Press, Judge Bruce Schroeder “took exception to news stories about his decisions” barring the men shot by Defendant Kyle Rittenhouse from being called “victims” in the courtroom, and the criticism of him because he had not yet ruled on a defense motion for a mistrial. “It’s just a shame that irresponsible statements are being made,” the judge said in regard to one story about his delay in ruling on the mistrial.

I am not up-front taking the Judge’s

side in this dispute — I don’t know the facts and I do think that professionals — whether a lawyer in a courtroom or a judge, need to focus on their job and not be overly sensitive to public perception about what they are doing. But I am going to admit that we, journalists, sometimes simply shoot then aim when covering stories, seeking the angle that will drive readers before thinking about whether there are long-term implications not first obvious that might result from the stories we write.

Without going further down that road, let me simply suggest to each of you that the implications of a judge making comments like this affects each of us in our community. I urge you to find time after the holidays, as we get into 2022, to go sit down with your local judge and make sure that your relationship with your local court is on solid ground. Some of you will be getting new judges in the next year. Some of you got new judges a year ago and perhaps have never taken time to have a good conversation about how the court views its working relationship with your staff.

While this is important in terms of day-to-day operations, it is especially critical when and if the time comes that some major story on the statewide or nationwide level lands in your community. Many of our members can vouch that it can happen, overnight. Those are the times when

*"I urge you to find time after the holidays, as we get into 2022, to go sit down with your local judge and make sure that your relationship with your local court is on solid ground."*

having done your homework in advance ensures that your ability to get into the courtroom and get what you need to do your job is unimpaired by the concerns of the moment. The trust you have established in advance will pay off with the access you need.

So, as you make a list of things to do in 2022, add this to it. While I am focusing on

your relationship with your local judges, the same theory is important with any government officials you deal with regularly. It’s always a good idea to take time to listen to them talk first about how they do their job and their concerns about what the public is told, and then to also help them understand what would be helpful for you as you do your job.

Missouri Press Association, The Missouri Bar and the Missouri Press-Bar Commission worked hard in 2020 and 2021 to bring local judges to regional press meetings and to foster this two-way discussion, but it is up to each of you to make it happen in your own community. It’s true we are all having to do more with less, but this is one way investing a little time up front can pay off long-term.

Let me know how it goes!



Jean Maneke, is MPA's Legal Hotline attorney. Contact her at (816) 753-9000; [jmaneke@manekelaw.com](mailto:jmaneke@manekelaw.com).