

*Judge Bobbi Alpers, District 7, is the first and only female chief district court judge in Iowa history. Only five of the 112 district court judges were women when she was appointed to the bench in 1992. Today, Alpers is joined by the chief justice of the supreme court, the chief judge of the court of appeals, two court of appeals associate judges, 25 district court judges and 34 judicial magistrates as women on the bench.*

When Judge Alpers, was appointed district court judge, she knew all of her fellow female judges by their first names. She's not sure if she could say that today.

“When I first started, there were so few women judges that we stood out more,” she said. “I do think it is very different now with so many women involved in not just the legal profession but so many other professions that used to be male dominated. Initially it was a novelty, but now, because it is more common to see women in all positions, most people are less surprised or concerned to see a woman judge. It's wonderful that so many more women are being appointed, it's not 50 percent yet, but it is so many more than when I started.”



Judge Alpers might not have become a judge if not for her experience as a law clerk for the judges in the Seventh District 25 years ago.

“The starting point for me was when I graduated from law school and was looking for a job like everyone else,” she said. “Judge James Kelly, from the Seventh District, encouraged me to become a law clerk. I went and interviewed and fortunately was selected. I may not have chosen to become a judge if I had not worked as a clerk. After working there I thought, ‘Gee, this is something I would be really interested in.’ It was apparent that the judges had full day of work and each day was different from the one before.”

In the year that Judge Alpers served as a law clerk, she gained a unique perspective of the law from the district court judges. It was an opportunity to see cases from start to finish before she every tried a case as an attorney. The most important thing she learned was her responsibility as a lawyer.

“One of the benefits of being a law clerk is that after the lawyers left the courtroom, the judges would often offer me advice,” Judge Alpers said. “One thing I remember thinking about often as a lawyer and now as a judge is that they told me that when a lawyer signs his name to something they are responsible for it and therefore they should always do their best work.”

After serving as a law clerk, Judge Alpers worked as an assistant Scott County Attorney and then in the private practice of law in Davenport. She served as a part-time judicial magistrate from 1987 to 1992. One of her former bosses encouraged her to apply for the magistrate position and then offered her advice once she was appointed.

“When I was done clerking and began practicing law I was often arguing cases in front of my old bosses,” she said. “One of them, Judge David Sohr, was chair of the county magistrate committee and he asked if I was interested in the open magistrate position and that I should apply. As a magistrate, I was told that the work I do needs to be done as quickly as possible because people want a resolution. The people coming to the court were at their last resort and they feel like once they turned over their dispute to a magistrate or judge, they want a ruling right away. As a magistrate, I saw that the judges could really offer help to these people or at least resolve the dispute. Even though they may not have liked the decision, people seemed glad their problem was resolved.”

After five years as a magistrate, 14 years as a district court judge and having worked for three different chief judges, Judge Alpers let it be known that she would like to be a chief judge.

“I had an interest in the chief judge position for quite awhile and I told Judge Schoenthaler (District 7 Chief Judge at the time),” she said. “So he involved me in projects that would help prepare me for the position such as hiring the court administrator and assistant court administrator. After being a judge for so long, I knew what the job entailed and that it was intensive work with both the job from the bench and administrative and personnel issues.”

Judge Alpers calls the position a “real balancing act” between handling a full case load and supervising all judicial officers and court employees in the district. She enjoys the chief judge’s responsibility to plan for the future of the district. The continual letters from prisoners looking for help is her least favorite part of the job.

“I enjoy making the most of the resources that we have and having a voice in decisions that will have a beneficial impact on the way we do things for many years to come,” she said. “One of my challenges is the many letters I receive from so many people in jail and prison. My signature is on the orders so once a prisoner sees my name, they think: ‘there’s someone I can contact.’ They all have ideas and I try to respond to all of them but I usually have to look at their file to understand their idea. It’s a challenge but I believe that it is work that needs to be done.”

Judge Alpers and her husband live on 10 acres in the country and like to spend time there planting trees, mowing, and building lacework walls with the limestone that falls from the bluffs on our property. She also enjoys traveling, reading and biking on the country roads around her home.