

Court-TV — with a local twist

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By Michelle Lore

For a little more than a year the Hennepin County District Court has treated residents of the Twin Cities area to its own version of Court-TV.

“Meet Your Court” — a 30-minute program hosted by Chief Hennepin County District Court Judge Kevin Burke — appears twice a week on the Channel 6 Metro Cable Network. On a typical show, Burke leads a discussion with two or three guests about various topics relating to the court system. Guests have included attorneys, court managers, judges, Supreme Court justices and representatives from public interest and community groups.

The executive producer of the 30-minute program is the District Court's chief information officer, Larry Anderson; Ken Bergstrom, who also works in the Office of Legislative, Community and Media Relations, serves as the producer.

While the show may lack in the glitz and glamour of “Allie McBeal” or “The Practice,” unlike more dramatic law-related television shows it provides accurate and useful information about nuts-and-bolts questions people have concerning the courts.

“I recognize that despite my strong efforts we are probably not going to knock ‘Judging Amy’ off the air,” Burke recently told *Minnesota Lawyer*. “But it is amazing about the number of people that actually watch our little show.”

Greater understanding

The idea for the “Meet Your Court” program was actually formed many years ago, during Burke's first tenure as chief judge of the 4th Judicial District, which lasted from 1992 to 1996.

“I thought of this idea when I was chief judge before and never got it done,” he said.

According to Burke, the reason behind the formation of the program is the belief that the media generally fails to report on what is really happening in the court

system.

"It seems to me that ... there is not an awful lot of reporting for the public about what goes on in the courthouse," Burke observed. "It tends to [focus on] the crime of the week or the day. It tends to ignore family court. It tends to ignore the broader issues of public policy that are facing the judiciary. And it clearly ignores the fact that there are 61 elected officials in Hennepin County who are pretty anonymous and frankly, will remain anonymous."

But the public needs to know what its elected officials are like, what they are doing and why they are doing it, the judge continued. "[Meet Your Court] is an avenue to get better public understanding of the courts and hopefully increase the public's commitment to saying a good court is what we want."

Burke also pointed out that other branches of government, like the Hennepin County Board, the Minneapolis City Council and the Minnesota Legislature, all film themselves and broadcast it on television. What the Hennepin County bench is doing through the "Meet Your Court" program is very similar to what the other two branches of government are doing with their broadcasts, Burke observed.

The chief judge also stressed that he did not set out to make the "Meet Kevin Burke" show, nor was it his mission in life to run a television program.

"I don't want people to say 'this is Kevin's show,'" said Burke. "It's not. [Rather], it's very much about the judges as a whole and the court as a whole trying to tell the community what we are trying to do."

No lack of topics

The first episode of "Meet Your Court" aired in January 2001. Even after fourteen months on the air, however, organizers of the show say they are far from running out of topics to discuss.

In discussing the tone of the show during the organizational phase — which began in July 2000 — the producers were determined to make it "light and open" and feature some local personalities, according to Anderson. The producers also decided to focus the first few episodes on family and juvenile court issues and some of the court's initiatives in those areas.

To date, the half-hour program has covered a wide variety of subjects ranging from the interworkings of the juvenile, family, property and drug courts to issues surrounding guardians ad litem and court interpreters to more sensitive topics like race and civil

rights, domestic violence and child abuse.

"I don't know how long we'll go on, but it's not from a lack of topics," Burke contended, adding that people seem to be enthusiastic to talk about these issues.

Anderson confirmed that it is not difficult to find people to appear on the program.

"The tougher part is coordinating the guests," he said.

Explaining that they are certainly open to ideas, the show's organizers encourage attorneys, judges and community members to let them know if there are important issues or topics affecting the court system that have yet to be discussed.

"If there is a critical issue out there, then we've got to get it on the table and not think that if we put it under the rug people will ignore it," said Burke.

Ratings wars

As with most programs on the Metro Cable Network, the costs involved in broadcasting "Meet Your Court" are minimal, consisting primarily of the expenses incurred in paying the stage crew.

Burke explained that no one other than the stage crew gets paid to put on the program. The chief judge is not given any extra compensation to host the show and none of the guests are paid for appearing. Anderson nor Bergstrom have likewise taken on the project as an addition to their regular duties. They get the joys of a producer's credit — but no added compensation for their efforts.

The small amount of money required to produce the show comes out of the court budget — although Burke and the producers have considered soliciting private dollars as well.

The problem with private dollars, according to Burke, is the appearance of impropriety with a program entitled "Meet Your Court" — brought to you by groups like the Minnesota Trial Lawyers Association or by individual local law firms. "That doesn't ring right," he said.

Burke also explained that some of the show's episodes — like those relating to family court — have been recycled and used as training tapes for court personnel.

While he can't be sure of the exact number of people watching the show, Burke nonetheless feels that people are in fact tuning in.

"We have no ability to do Nielson ratings, but we know about what the number of subscribers to Metro 6 are," Burke explained. He estimates that at times the show may reach as many as a few thousand people. Burke added that he's received numerous e-mails from community members who report they've seen all or parts of the program.

Although feedback has generally been positive, Burke noted: "If people don't like it, they don't watch it. So I wouldn't think we'd get much negative feedback."

One criticism of the show, however, came from a Ramsey County District Court judge.

"I am not David Letterman," Burke said with a laugh. "[But] I've gotten some grief from a friend of mine on the Ramsey County bench who says that we need more humor on it."

Lights, camera, action!

Anderson explained that generally three or four shows are taped at one time. Typically, guests are asked to arrive 15 minutes before taping is to begin in order to meet each other and allow the camera crew time to prepare.

The recently revised and updated set is located in the Metro Cable Network offices in downtown Minneapolis. The set is small, but "cozy." During taping, guests are seated around a table, with Minnesota's state seal, as well as the Minnesota and United States flags visible behind them. *Minnesota Lawyer* recently visited the set of the program while an episode was being taped.

The topic of the program being filmed was "The Chief Judge," and took on a little different **twist** than other episodes, with *Star Tribune* columnist Doug Grow serving as the guest host.

"I don't know that the public knows about the leadership of our bench," Burke said in explaining why the topic was chosen. "We are completely invisible. So it seemed to me that the public should know what the chief judge does [and] what are the issues [he or she] is facing."

While Burke did not serve as the host of the episode, he nonetheless participated as a guest — along with Judge Daniel Mabley, who was the 4th Judicial District's chief judge from 1996 through 2000, and recently retired Judge Roberta Levy, the chief judge from 1989 through 1992.

The three judges shared their observations regarding the role of the chief judge in the court system and the perceived "invisibility" of judges to the public. The episode will be broadcast later this month.

"Meet Your Court" airs Sundays at 7:00 p.m. and Tuesdays at 9:00 p.m. In addition, those interested in viewing the program are invited to do so on Wednesdays at 12:30 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room in the A-level of the Hennepin County Government Center. To receive a weekly e-mail on upcoming editions of the show, e-mail Ken Bergstrom at kenbergstrom@co.hennepin.mn.us.