



(Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post) - Magistrate Judge Karen Howze sees about 70 cases a day, more than any other judge in the courthouse.

Onetime aspiring nun now serves as D.C. arraignment court judge

By Keith L. Alexander, Published: January 7

It's just after 1 p.m. on a recent Monday when D.C. Superior Court Magistrate Judge Karen A. Howze takes the bench, mug of tea in hand, and swivels her seat forward to tackle the day's cases.

First up is a woman charged with PCP possession. Howze orders her released from the jail where she spent the night, puts her in a drug-treatment program and gives her a curfew.

"Do you understand these orders?" Howze asks the woman. "Yes, ma'am," she responds softly.

As the woman is ushered away, four marshals present a burly man charged with assaulting a police officer at United Medical Center. Prosecutors want him barred from the hospital on Southern Avenue SE; Howze declines and then frees him until his next court appearance.

Howze handles three more cases in 10 minutes: She orders a mental evaluation and more jail time for a man charged with using a brick as a weapon. A transvestite accused of prostitution is told to stay 100 yards from a block of K Street NW. Then come three alleged burglars. Wanted in Virginia and Maryland, they are to be held for three days to give state authorities time to pick them up.

Over four more hours, Howze hears an additional 65 cases. She handles as many as 80 a day, about one every three minutes — about twice as many as any criminal judge in the courthouse.

Life inside the District's arraignment court, known as Courtroom C-10 in the courthouse's lower level, can be chaotic, sometimes resembling a manufacturing line where the parts are people's lives. Howze, a 61-year-old aspiring-nun-turned-journalist-turned-child-welfare-attorney-turned-judge, tries to put them in place. The journey seems natural to a woman who joined a convent at 17 to "serve God and serve people." Now, instead of a nun's habit, she dons a judge's robe.

Howze's influence is substantial. She's often the first judge to hear details of some of the most serious allegations filed in the District. She sees many defendants soon after they are charged, deciding whether they should be released or held until their next hearing or perhaps sent to drug or mental-health treatment. Her rulings can have an immediate effect — even if a defendant's trial is months away.

The courtroom can be turbulent. Police, victims' families and the accused sometimes confront one another, and affairs often boil over. Security officers frequently remove people from the room.

"Judges meet people in their worst situations," Howze said in a recent interview in her chambers. "We're supposed to be able to interact with them in a way to possibly change their lives around."

The District rarely releases defendants on a financial bond, an attempt to make sure they are treated fairly regardless of financial means. Howze bases her rulings on District statutes, information from prosecutors, probation agency information, criminal and mental-health histories, and drug-background checks — and on their demeanor in court. She hopes a careful decision will prevent them from heading back to jail.

"There's so much going on in that courtroom, they don't know what I'm saying," Howze said. "So they end up back in front of me for failing to adhere to my orders. Maybe, by my interaction, they may not come back."

Right perspective

[Lee F. Satterfield](#), the court's chief judge, counted on that perspective when he put Howze in charge of the arraignment court two years ago.

"You don't want to make a mistake of releasing somebody who shouldn't be released or holding somebody who shouldn't be held," Satterfield said. "You have to focus on each individual case to avoid doing any legal harm to anyone."

Satterfield lauded Howze's mix of temperament and legal expertise.

Her focus is evident in the fast-paced courtroom: She demands quiet — especially when speaking, but also when reading. When a prosecutor and defense attorney chatted after addressing her in a recent hearing, Howze issued a stern warning.

“If my voice is going,” she said, “nobody else is talking.”

She sometimes contemplates potentially controversial rulings. At the arraignment of Banita Jacks, charged in 2008 with [killing her four daughters](#), Howze and prosecutor Deborah Sines had a heated exchange. Sines, who wanted Jacks held in jail as long as possible, said the decision should have been simple because of the seriousness of the charges.

“How many bodies do you need?” Sines pleaded. But Jacks had no criminal record. Howze, who was not yet the full-time arraignment court judge, eventually agreed to Sines's request for a different reason: Taking note of authorities' outline of Jacks's behavior — she lived with her daughters' corpses for months before police discovered them — Howze deemed the woman not mentally fit and possibly dangerous.

“Our job is not to judge anyone, but instead to judge what they did,” she said.

Prosecutors say they often tailor their arguments toward Howze's interest in defendants' histories rather than the charges against them. “We've learned what she needs and what she's looking for,” one said after a recent hearing before her.

Howze, the daughter of an autoworker and a schoolteacher, speaks infrequently of her time in the convent. Recalling a Detroit childhood in the 1960s shaped by race riots and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., she says those experiences and memories have guided her since.

“I wanted to make the world better,” said Howze, who tutored inner-city children as a habit-and-veil-wearing teen. But Howze said that after three years, she grew frustrated at the convent and left to study journalism at the University of Southern California.

Three years later, in the mid-1970s, Howze landed a job as a police reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle. Covering crime, Howze said, still felt like a community service. “But just in a different way, a different calling,” she said.

She enrolled in law school with ambitions of covering California's courts. But she never got that assignment and moved on to other news organizations until she was picked to work on a USA Today prototype in 1981. She was one of the newspaper's first managing editors.

In 1985, she adopted two sisters, both with special developmental needs, from a mother who was a drug abuser. She later adopted their infant sister. As a single parent working long hours, she left newspapers in 1991 to seek a job that would let her devote more time to her children.

Most stressful work

Her year-long struggle to adopt her older daughters led to legal work on child welfare and adoption. She investigated cases of neglected special-needs children for 11 years, work she calls the most stressful she has done.

“My goal each day was to wake up and read the newspaper and not see any of their names in the paper as having committed a crime or dead,” she said.

She was appointed a magistrate judge in 2002.

“I realize life is about paths that are taken,” Howze said. “If I had not done the convent or adopted my kids, I would not be where I am now. You take the choices you make in life, or the choices that are made for you, and you move with them to the next path.”