

Service, mentorship and doughnuts earn high accolades

‘None are more deserving’

Waukesha County Judge Ralph Ramirez named 2021 state Judge of the Year

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WAUKESHA — Being a judge isn't just about law and order.

Among other things, it's about service — serving those in the courtroom, others around them, and the larger community, both on the job, and often in a variety of other endeavors.

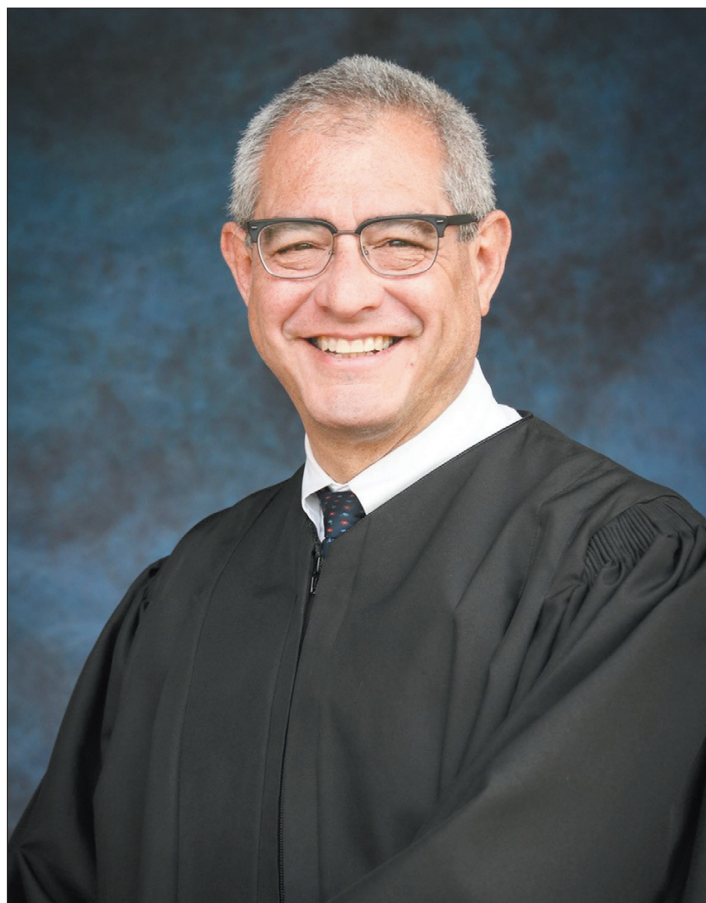
Those are just a few of the reasons that Waukesha County Circuit Court Judge Ralph Ramirez has been named the 2021 Wisconsin Judge of the Year by the Wisconsin State Bar Association's Bench and Bar Committee.

A number of his colleagues on the Waukesha County bench — Judges Michael Aprahamian, Paul Bugenhagen Jr. and Michael Maxwell — cited those attributes in nominating him for the award. Judge Laura Lau also offered her own testimony about what Ramirez brings to the bench, saying the honor is “well deserved.”

Lau said she was mentored by Ramirez and “Still I feel like I am. He is always available if I have an issue come up that is sort of new to me, or I want to bounce it off of someone. He's available to me seven days a week, even if he's on vacation he will always say, ‘Let me take a look at it and I'll give you a call back,’” she said.

“He's an incredible teacher. Just like you'd like a parent to be, he doesn't solve it for you, he kind of leads you down an path and you figure it out. ... I've been super lucky he is such a giver in terms of his time and sharing resources. He's a phenomenal human being.”

Judge Michael Aprahamian said Ramirez is an unofficial mentor for him, too. When Aprahamian was named to the bench seven years ago, “The first thing he did was give me a bunch of notes and a checklist to help me out going into criminal (court) because I was a commercial litigant. He also said if you ever have an issue just step off the bench and call one of us. I took him up several times when I was thrown a curveball,” Aprahamian said. “He's just a great colleague and invaluable resource for all of us here.”



Submitted photos

Waukesha County Circuit Court Judge Ralph Ramirez has been named the 2021 Wisconsin Judge of the Year by the Wisconsin State Bar Association's Bench and Bar Committee.

In nominating Ramirez for the distinction, Aprahamian, Bugenhagen and Maxwell all wrote about how Ramirez took them under his wing, and how he steps in to help others in a time of need.

When the courthouse was first feeling the effects of the pandemic and facing the challenge of resolving cases with few if any in-person hearings, “Ralph was a true leader to help our county through this pandemic,” Aprahamian wrote.

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>> **At right:** The Ramirez family is seen in a recent photo. Top, from left: Joseph Ramirez, daughter Alicia Kiser with husband Kevin Kiser, Maria Ramirez; second row: Renee and Ralph Ramirez with grandchildren Harper Kiser and Will Kiser.





Submitted photos

Fishing and snowshoeing are among Waukesha County Circuit Court Judge Ralph Ramirez's preferred pastimes at his property near Eagle River.

Ramirez

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He added Ramirez was on numerous committees to address the crisis and wasn't hesitant to pick up cases from heavy court commissioner calendars to ease their workload. "I no doubt understand that during this trying year, many judges are worthy of this prestigious award — but in my opinion, none are more deserving than Ralph," Aprahamian wrote.

Art, science to being a judge

Ramirez said he was honored to receive the award, and to know how many of his fellow judges backed his receiving it.

He said he enjoys the process of imparting lessons of experience to help other judges develop their careers. Beyond mentoring judges locally, he also is part of the Judicial College, helping judges across the state learn the ropes of wearing the robe. He said those who mentored him were judges Donald Hassin Jr. and Jim Kieffer, not just in teaching him, but also teaching by example in how they did their job when he practiced before them.

"My position is there is an art and a science to being a judge. The science is knowing the law and knowing the cases and being familiar with the things we need to know, but there is also an art to being a judge and the art to being a judge is being able to run a courtroom, the ability to maintain control in your courtroom, not as an authoritarian but rather in a proper and appropriate and considerate manner so that everybody who is in that courtroom understands I am listening to what they have to say and everybody's going to get a fair shake in that courtroom," he said.

Ramirez, the son and grandson of migrant workers, grew up in Waukesha and graduated from Waukesha South High School in 1977. He



Judge Ralph Ramirez and his wife, Renee, are seen near Eagle River.

attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he earned a degree in political science in 1981, and followed that with a law degree from UW Law School in 1984. He served as an assistant district attorney in Eau Claire County from 1984-86, leaving that post for the same job here in Waukesha County from 1986-99. In 1999, he became the first Latino elected to the Waukesha County bench. Judges Ness Flores and Jess Martinez served as judges, as well, after being appointed; Flores later won re-election. As for the significance of that, Ramirez said, "Waukesha County elects its officials based on qualifications and commitment to the community, and that's important to me."

While criminal cases often grab the headlines from the courthouse — and Ramirez has presided over some of the higher-profile cases in recent years — he said there is something both enjoyable and challenging to each of the divisions of the courthouse, which also includes family court, civil court, and juvenile court. He said he started in juvenile court and "I think you realize every one of those cases involving children and looking at (Child In Need of Protective Services) cases and (Termination of Parental Rights) cases, those cases are as big as they get because it involves children, their

lives, their formative years and things that are going to have an effect on them as individuals and indeed the community for a very long time if you don't help them get the right start."

In addition to judicial education, Ramirez is part of the state's CCAP steering committee. He also is on the board for ProHealth Care, and in the past has been active with the Waukesha Noon Rotary Club, local United Way board, Waukesha Public Library board, and the Waukesha County Volunteer Center, among others.

When not working, Ramirez is spending time with his family, which includes his wife, Renee, who runs the Community Smiles Dental Clinics, as well as three children and two grandchildren. He also enjoys the outdoors: kayaking, biking, fishing, hiking, hunting at his place in Eagle River, as well as being a "fair to middling cook."

But at the courthouse, Ramirez has found another way of serving: About once a month he announces a "10-0 doughnut code," a play on the police 10-codes to describe incidents, springing for doughnuts.

"It comes from doing the right thing for people. It's something that I enjoy doing. I think everybody likes it. It's a small thing but the small things matter. It's a token of my appreciation for the people that I work with."