

# Powerful Point

**Judge Lawrence Brown's family history helps him deftly handle collaborative court defendants.**

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**Lawrence G. Brown**

*Sacramento County (Sacramento)*

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SACRAMENTO — A defendant in an orange jumpsuit stood in a holding cell as Superior Court Judge Lawrence G. Brown walked him through the basics of mental health court: a minimum of one year to graduate; no drugs, alcohol or firearms; stick to your medication.

“I’m going to make a wild guess: You were not on your medication at the time?” Brown said. The judge then mentioned his own sister’s 40-year struggle with schizophrenia, adding, “She’s always better when she’s on her medication.”

The defendant agreed to the terms, drawing a laugh from the room when he gave the exact address he is supposed to stay away from due to assault and vandalism charges. Minutes later, Brown mentioned his sister and his “wild guess” about medication in another exchange.

He got into a familiar back-and-forth with another longtime program participant, calling him “young man” in reference to his gray beard and balding head.

Later, a man in shackles broke the calm atmosphere by angrily yelling expletives. His public defender calmed him down and explained to Brown the man’s counselors kept leaving the program once he’d established a relationship with them, “which is difficult for him.”

It was a typical Wednesday afternoon for Judge Brown, who oversees collaborative justice criminal courts in Sacramento County. His mental health court saw 35 to 40 defendants that day. On Monday afternoons, he presides over adult drug court. On Tuesday, he sees defendants with less serious mental health issues. Thursdays: reentry. Fridays: Proposition 36 court.

Brown speaks slowly and calmly, sometimes joking with defendants or staff.

While he frequently mentions his sister in court, in an interview he shot down the idea his family’s experience led him directly to his current job.

“I would like to tell the story I sought out the court because my sister has mental illness,” Brown said days earlier. “But I had some trepidation. I think for anyone who has loved ones afflicted with a serious mental illness, there is a profound loss that comes with it.”

He took on the role in 2013 as part of a standard judicial rotation. But the next year, Brown made the unusual request of taking all of the collaborative courts on a permanent basis because he found he “took to it.”

Attorneys agree. Chris C. Carlson, the principal criminal attorney in the Alternative Courts Unit with the district attorney’s office, said Brown has the kind of patience that comes with experience.

“You can’t trust your gut; that’s one of the things this court teaches you,” Carlson said. “Oftentimes, someone who starts out as a disaster — they will get it. If you’re trying to quit drugs, you’re going to relapse — that’s part of recovery.”

Every Wednesday after lunch, Brown holds a meeting with prosecutors, public defenders, case workers and others involved in the mental health court. They go through the afternoon’s cases, each giving their assessment of what’s going on with a particular defendant. There is a familiarity among the more than dozen people in the room.

“We try to keep it fun and lighthearted,” Carlson said, adding Brown is a “jokester.”

Brown brings that same attitude into court, Carlson added, but the judge also remembers details about defendants’ lives he can recall weeks later, asking them about particular family members and other relationships.

“Judge Brown is a very laid-back individual,” said Jennifer Smith, a case manager who has worked with the court for four years.

“I think it’s important for those who are suffering from mental health issues; you have to put everything out on the table so they understand the options they have,” Smith said. “You have to be patient with them.”

Brown said he’s mentioned his own family’s struggle hundreds of times.

“I do find it oftentimes to be powerful,” Brown said. “It underscores that mental illness knows no societal bounds.”

Brown’s father was a lineman for the telephone company, his mother a school secretary. But their neighborhood was stable and gang-free. He was a Cub Scout, had a paper route and rode his bicycle to school. “I joke I grew up in the mean cul-de-sacs of Santa Rosa,” Brown said.

His interest in the law began in high school. Brown’s first serious girlfriend happened to be the daughter of John F. Shea, a well-known attorney and onetime leader of the Sonoma County Democratic Central Committee. A federal building in Santa Rosa is now named after him.

Shea “took a liking” to him. While the relationship with the daughter didn’t work out over the long term, Brown said Shea was instrumental in his journey to UC Davis School of Law.

Brown said he wanted to be a civil attorney like his mentor, “but the economy had different ideas.” Graduating into the 1989 recession, he instead took a job as a deputy district attorney in Ventura County.

The move proved to be career altering. His supervisor at the time was Gregory D. Totten, now the Ventura County district attorney. In 1994, Totten was offered the job of director of the California District Attorneys Association and asked Brown to be his top deputy. Brown took over as executive director himself two years later, at 32, and stayed until 2003.

During that time, Brown advocated for much of the tough-on-crime legislation that has since been dismantled under former Gov. Jerry Brown’s realignment policies. Many of those laws pushed back on the very sorts of judicial discretion Brown now exercises in his own court. But when asked if he sees his current role as a way of making amends, he said no.



“It was a different job,” Brown said. “It was a different era. Society was rightly concerned about the levels of crime.”

He went on to prosecute many more people as first assistant to U.S. Attorney McGregor W. Scott of the Eastern District of California. Brown served a stint as acting U.S. attorney before Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed him to the bench in 2010.

Brown continues to hear criminal trials on his morning calendar. In 2017, he allowed the state Department of Justice to continue its prosecution of backpage.com, the now-defunct website used for prostitution.

But his transition from right-hand man to some of the best-known prosecutors in the state to a judge widely praised by the defense bar was completed last year when he won the Judge of the Year Award from the Indigent Defense Panel in Sacramento.

“He just has such a deft way of helping the most vulnerable in our community,” said Sacramento defense attorney Kelly Babineau, who nominated him for the honor. “The whole defense bar felt he really deserved recognition for that.”

In his current role, Brown said he sees it at his job to “airlift out” a subset of defendants who don’t truly belong in the mainstream criminal justice system for one reason or another.

“These collaborative courts allow you to have a bit more of a personality, to connect with people,” Brown said.

Brown has a 19-year-old son and two teen stepchildren from his second marriage, among other responsibilities. But almost every week, he takes time out from his busy schedule to drive to Santa Rosa to bring his elderly mother to see his sister in her mental health facility.

The visits are sometimes as short as 15 minutes. The judge said even after his mother dies, he plans to keep going.

“It’s been a gift for me. I feel so much better having rebuilt the relationship,” Brown said.

*Here are some of Judge Brown’s recent cases and the attorneys involved:*

• *People v. Ferrer*, 16FE019224 — pimping, money laundering

For the prosecution: Maggy Krell, California Department of Justice

For the defendant: James C. Grant, Davis Wright Tremaine LLP

• *People v. Sultan*, 14F05977 — medical fraud

For the prosecution: Brian J. Keats, California Department of Justice

For the defendant: Kelly Babineau, Sacramento

• *People v. Dorfer*, 17FE015519 — felony hit and run

For the prosecution: Teresa P. Sydow, district attorney’s office

For the defendant: William Portanova, Sacramento

• *People v. Goodman*, 17FE011387 — forgery

For the prosecution: Chris C. Carlson, district attorney's office

For the defendant: Ryan J. Raftery, public defender's office

•*People v. Goodman*, 15F00610 — animal cruelty

For the prosecution: Hillary G. Bagley, district attorney's office

For the defendant: Christopher P. Ryan, public defender's office