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# Did you miss it?

## CLAY TODAY

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Tall Order:

# Judge ponders life after retirement

By Eric Cravey  
Managing Editor

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – McCarthy Crenshaw Jr. has never been short on options.

As an 18-year-old, the six-foot-seven, unassuming Jacksonville native had to choose between a full basketball scholarship to play center for the University of Georgia or forego college and play pro baseball straight out of Lee High.

Now, as his 70th birthday approaches, Crenshaw is pondering his options again. After serving 20 years as a judge in Florida's 4th Judicial Circuit – the majority of those years in Clay County – the retiring Crenshaw has the option of becoming a senior judge or returning to private law practice.

However, he believes the rules governing senior judges may be too restrictive and he's not sure if he wants to jump back into law, just yet. So, as a man of multiple talents and training, he could enter the ministry or become active in fundraising.

"This is the best job I've done so far. I'm looking for another opportunity to serve God and serve my fellow man," said Crenshaw, who graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with a Master of Theology degree in 1989.

The Florida Constitution prohibits judges from serving past their 70th birthday unless there are fewer than three years remaining in their term. "My timing was off," Crenshaw said, with a wide smile. "I turn 70 on January 3rd and I have four years left in my term."

However, the affable judge leaves the bench Dec. 31 with no regrets. Appointed by the late Gov. Lawton Chiles in mid-1992, Crenshaw had to run for office for his first full six-year term shortly thereafter, the same year. He hasn't faced an opponent since.

When the circuit shifted his duties from Duval to Clay County in 1998, Crenshaw continued handling cases involving abused, abandoned or neglected children and divorce cases. But it's his work with juvenile criminal cases where he made an impact on the fabric of Clay County.

One of the landmarks of his tenure was the establishment of a mandatory class called "Character and Self-Control," in which at least one parent was required to attend along with the juvenile defendant. The two-hour, five-week class aimed to prevent youth from becoming repeat offenders.

"That's where I think made a significant difference," said Crenshaw, who after leaving UGA in 1965 moved to Seattle, Wash. where he worked for Campus Crusade for Christ before moving back to Athens to enter law school in the fall of 1969. "If you can affect someone's attitude, you



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CRAVEY

Fourth Circuit Judge McCarthy "Mack" Crenshaw Jr., right, stands with Kaye Tate, judicial assistant, in a Clay County Courtroom. The judge, a standout athlete at the University of Georgia, retires Dec. 31 after a 20-year career on the bench.

can help them be successful in life."

Throughout the years, some parents complained about having to take the class, while others had a change of heart because they were finally spending quality time with their child. And the proof is in the community.

He often runs into young adults in the Orange Avenue McDonald's who, during their younger years, made visits through his courtroom due to a teenaged misstep. He says on any given month, he may be greeted with "Judge, do you remember me?"

"I'll tell them, 'No, I don't remember you,' but they'll

turn around and tell me that they remember the definition of obedience," Crenshaw said, smiling again.

Each "Character and Self-Control" student was given a business card for safekeeping. They were to carry the card at all times or be held in contempt of court and to learn the definition of obedience that was printed on the back of it. Crenshaw was certain that if the troubled youth learned who was in charge in every given situation, their behavior would change.

"I'd tell them 'When you find out who's in authority and you do what they ask of you, you'll be amazed how successful you'll become,'" Crenshaw said.

He said the program's success was evident in that recidivists, or repeat offenders, were few in his courtroom.

Crenshaw's colleagues attest to his concern for children, something they say is evident in the manner in which he carries himself as a judge.

Steve Nelson, director of the Clay County State Attorney's Office, will remember Crenshaw as a dedicated jurist who not only deeply cares about children but also works hard to make both sides of a case understand what they were up against in the courtroom.

"His sense of dedication and commitment to get the children back on the right track and to be responsible for the consequences of their acts was always at the forefront of his decision making," Nelson said. "He was not just a judge in his courtroom – at times that role called for a teacher, a preacher, or a counselor for those that needed it."

"I think children have a very big place in his heart," said LaRae Hendrix, secretary of the Clay County Bar Association and private practice attorney who has tried cases before Crenshaw since 2003. "I know that there are children today that are young adults, and I know that's it's probably because of him, that they've gone on to do the right things in school or other aspects of their lives."

He credits Nelson Vinal, his Lee High head basketball coach at instilling in him the importance of staying positive in the grips of adversity. And during his career, he is sure that there have been those who have accused him of being too soft or too tough on crime at the same time.

"I try to evaluate the criticism and not remember the critic and hold it against that person," Crenshaw said, stacks of papers sitting atop his office desk. "I believe I've made good, fair, correct legal decisions every time."

As far as what his next role in the community will be, Crenshaw is keeping an open mind.

"I'd like to be more involved in Christian activities and Christian fundraising, ministry and helping people change," he said.