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Surbeck 1st Hoosier to win Rehnquist award

Brian Francisco | Washington editor

WASHINGTON – Allen County Superior Court Judge John Surbeck received a national award for judicial excellence Thursday for achievements he said were born of frustration.

In a ceremony at the U.S. Supreme Court attended by more than 250 people, Surbeck was presented the William H. Rehnquist Award by the National Center for State Courts.

The award was given to Surbeck by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts. The honor is named for Roberts' predecessor, who died in 2005.

Surbeck is the 17th recipient of the Rehnquist award and the first from Indiana.

He was saluted for starting the Allen County Re-Entry Court in 2001 and promoting the program since then.

The court allows for the early release of prison inmates in exchange for closer court supervision – including random drug tests and ankle bracelets that monitor an offender's whereabouts – than is typical in traditional parole and probation programs.

An Allen County judge since 1988, Surbeck recalled having grown "very frustrated" by the number of repeat offenders appearing in his court, and he decided his rulings and sentences in criminal cases "didn't seem to make any difference."

"Because as a public defender I had represented the first generation of these folks," he said. As a judge, "I sentenced a second generation. And then 10 or 12 years in, I was sentencing the third generation for the same crimes. It was frustrating, and I didn't know what to do. I wasn't accomplishing what I thought I should."

He credited officials at Allen County Community Corrections and the U.S. Justice Department for asking him to develop what would become the nation's second re-entry court.

"I was just doing what needed to be done to solve the problem that presented itself," he said.

Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Brent Dickson said that five years after the court was started, its criminal recidivism rate was 34 percent, compared with 60 percent nationwide. More than 600 people have been through Re-Entry Court since its inception.

Surbeck "decided to go beyond the call of duty as a judge," Dickson said, "... and to innovate, promote and outreach, to make a difference in the lives of the offenders and their families and in the level of public safety in his community."



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Allen Superior Court Judge John Surbeck stands in front of an image of the U.S. Supreme Court that is shielding the building during construction Thursday in Washington, D.C.

Surbeck said that despite "a lot of naysayers," he received encouragement from colleagues around Indiana. He especially praised the 30 people from the Fort Wayne area who attended Thursday's ceremony, including fellow judges, lawyers, court officials, state legislators, a pastor and friends.

"It is those people who are responsible, truly, for Re-Entry Court," Surbeck said.

He saved his final thanks for his wife, Jane.

"She's always been very supportive and inspiring in everything I do," Surbeck said. "She's truly the reason I'm here."

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