

## Along the Divide: New JP learning the ropes

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ANACONDA — Behind the bench in Anaconda justice court, new Justice of the Peace Larry Pahut uses whatever spare time he has for legal research.

An open copy of Montana Code Annotated is littered with multi-colored highlights and Post-it notes. Case files are full with information, motions and jury instructions for coming trials.

Elected a little more than three months ago, Pahut, 61, must know and understand it all in detail. Every defendant must receive equal treatment. Procedures must be consistent.

"At times, it's overwhelming," Pahut said. "Every day is an important learning experience. There are different situations every time."

The novice judge is tasked with jurisdiction over misdemeanor matters, including criminal, traffic and hunting offenses.

"You really need to know these laws to make sure everyone gets a fair shake," he said.

Formerly a counselor technician with the Warm Springs Addictions Treatment and Change program, or WATCH, Pahut already knows the importance of good listening skills and impartiality.

Pahut spent eight years teaching anger management, cognitive principles and restructuring classes to felony drunk driving offenders. They all have their stories, he said, but he learned not to get sentimental.

Some were reluctant to take responsibility for their actions — similar to some others now before him in the courtroom.

"I would tell them they're making a choice, and with those choices come consequences," he said. "We want to make people accountable for their actions."

Looking for a change, Pahut filed for justice of the peace when he learned former Judge JoAnne Welch would retire after three terms.

Pahut won the race last November, and said he feels he is doing a service to the community.

"I wanted to give back," he said.

Pahut still keeps in touch with Welch, and she offers whatever help she can. They talk about once every other week, and he is not afraid to ask questions, Welch said.

The interpretation of laws is up to each individual judge, but Welch can give tips on procedural matters that would otherwise stump someone new to the job, she said.

"He is doing very well, and he is very dedicated," Welch said. "I'm very proud of him."

Both Pahut and Welch recognized the further expertise of the two justice court clerks, Tina McKenney and Melissa Trainor.

"They are a superb help to any new judge," Welch said.

Deputy County Attorney Ellen Donohue works with Pahut on an almost daily basis, and has noticed an improvement over his first few months.

Primarily, Donohue said Pahut is willing to put in the work to get a good grasp on his duties.

"He's taking this seriously, and he's putting in the time," Donohue said. "I think we're lucky to have him."

With his family's support, Pahut said he will continue to hit the books to make sure he makes the right decisions.

"This is something I'm glad I did," he said. "I enjoy coming to work here."

A gavel on Justice of the Peace Larry Pahut's desk illustrates support from his former co-workers.