











My Sunday: Bond court judge's decision day  
By Josh Noel

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Whether for a misdemeanor or first-degree murder, almost everyone arrested in Cook County each weekend has one thing in common: an appearance in central bond court, at 26th Street and California Avenue. There, a black-robed judge reviews arrest reports, listens to arguments from the prosecution and the defense, then sets a bond for each of the accused -- not guilt or innocence, but the amount that must be posted to gain freedom until the next court date.

Bond court is open every day of the year, but it is Sundays that can be particularly busy with all of those arrested Friday and Saturday nights.

Associate Cook County Judge Israel Desierto, is one of a small team of judges who rotates into the Sunday shift. Desierto, 47 and a Philippines native who moved to the U.S. with his family at age 5, is known to offer brief, though stern, pep talks to those standing before him. As he sets their bonds, he often reminds them that they face a crossroads in their lives and then offers a "Good luck, young man."

Desierto never arrives at the courthouse empty-handed. On his way into work, he usually stops at a bakery or doughnut shop to buy enough goodies for everyone in the clerk's office. By 9, he beelines to the small, square courthouse office crammed with desks and filing cabinets, where he labors with half a dozen clerks over hundreds of cases.

"They're already there when I wake up," he says. "God bless 'em. They're the ones making sure all the paperwork I review is correct and directed to the appropriate agency. ... We're all in the same boat, working on a Sunday, so hopefully we can get things done and get back to our families."

When court begins at 11 a.m., he walks in, often to a packed room -- families of the accused, sheriff's deputies, a court reporter, an interpreter and the media.

Misdemeanor cases come first, and most are domestic batteries. Desierto says he is guided by this simple premise: "Bond court is not punishment -- it's guaranteeing an offender's appearance in court. They're still presumed innocent. Based on what you know about these individuals, you have to decide what will ensure their appearance in court."

Felonies are next. "It's primarily narcotics-related offenses, but lately there have been a lot of property crimes. More burglaries, some robberies and armed robberies." Desierto dips into a sense of compassion that he traces to his childhood in the North Center neighborhood.

"I know there's a lot of difficulty out there, and sometimes people get caught up," he said. "When you read the facts of a case, you see there are very violent and criminal people and others who maybe their environment didn't give them the opportunity to make choices that people in a 'normal' environment would have made. If they've shown from their actions and their background that this instance was more bad judgment than a criminal act, I guess, then I might consider, instead of setting a higher bond, maybe putting them on a program."

Desierto is usually out of court by 3:30 p.m., when he shifts his attention back to family. He heads to his sister's house on the Northwest Side, where he spends time with his two brothers, his sister and his three nieces.

"There's always something going on," he says. "Usually I don't even bother going home [first]. With the girls I just listen and do what they want to do. But if they want to go to the park, I'll make a deal. I'll say, 'Can you read this to me first?' Some little book they have. Then we'll go play."

He stays until after dinner, which is often barbecue or Filipino food. Desierto is the first Filipino judge in the state -- "certainly a point of pride for my parents," he says.

"I make a dish called Pinakbet, which is vegetables and pork," he says. "I'll saute some tomatoes with onion and garlic, throw in some pork with the fat. Then eggplant, Chinese beans, okra, shrimp, and I like to add some red pepper. Our family does a lot of eating. Our celebrations are centered around eating."



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