

Kate Moser  
The Recorder  
11-17-2009  
<http://www.law.com>

**Ronald Albers**

**APPOINTED:** June 11, 2009

**AGE:** 60

**LAW SCHOOL:** University of Wisconsin Law School, 1974

**PREVIOUS JUDICIAL EXPERIENCE:** SF Superior Court Commissioner, 2002-2009

San Francisco Superior Court Judge Ronald Albers passed by the metal detector on a recent afternoon and glided in his sharp, brown suit out the front door, where a group of defendants had gathered before the day's calendar at Polk Street's Community Justice Center.

Immediately several defendants struck up conversations with the judge as if they were old friends.

Albers moved seamlessly from one conversation to the next with "his people," as he calls the defendants the court sees from the Tenderloin and South of Market neighborhoods.

Armed with an array of services to which Albers can refer defendants, the Community Justice Center collaborates with city agencies to tackle repeat criminal behavior.

The court opened in March with misdemeanors. In May, it started taking on felonies, and now, Albers says, two-thirds of the defendants there are high-risk offenders — the ones most likely to fail in treatment services and likely to harm the public. A mix of court-appointed attorneys, retained counsel and assistant district attorneys appear before Albers. Social workers are on hand, too.

Albers can do things the old-fashioned way — with probation, county jail and state prison. But the idea of the Community Justice Center is for all the parties to work together to address underlying problems that keep sending defendants back into the justice system. When a person makes the effort, probation terms can be shortened and charges can be reduced from felonies to misdemeanors. Albers works with lawyers to get defendants in order in a number of ways — for example, recently helping clear an old warrant out of Delaware for a recovering drug user in the Tenderloin, so he could qualify for services to help him get on a bus to Arizona, where he planned to start a new life.

Speaking passionately about the court, Albers really heats up on the subject of recidivism.

"If we can identify a cause for that pattern continuing, we have to tackle it," he said. "Everything that we do is focused around what's happening in that person's life."

Outside the court, defendants appear to appreciate Albers' approach.

"You run a great court — God bless you," said one man with a weather-beaten face who said he'd showed up to try to get his friend, a defendant on that day's calendar, back on his medication.

A woman asked Albers if he could get to her case early in the afternoon, because she was required to go to court before she could get her dose at the methadone clinic.

No problem, Albers said, and sure enough, he called the woman up early in the afternoon.

"Be strong, you're doing a great job for us here," he said to her then, after checking her progress and connecting her with a social worker to help get her medical attention for an impacted wisdom tooth.

Soon after, a man — a former defendant who now pitches in at the justice center by escorting people to various appointments — started passing a bowl of hard candies around the gallery, and defendants scooped up handfuls.

"For many people, the Hall of Justice is an ugly, ugly place," Albers said. "They've been basically eaten up in the system."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Albers, 60, to the bench in June. The former San Francisco public defender had long aspired to a judge's seat: Albers ran twice for judge in the 1990s and was appointed commissioner in 2002. He served as a bail commissioner and then was assigned to drug court for five years before being assigned to the community justice center.

San Francisco solo Erica Franklin, who appears before Albers often at the Community Justice Center and also made frequent appearances in his drug court, said the judge's current assignment suits him better than the other problem-solving courts would because of the number of places Albers is able to refer defendants at the Community Justice Center. "I think he's really fair, as I think he really wants to see people connect with the services," she said. "He's pretty sophisticated about how a lot of problems affect the criminal justice system. Not all judges are so open-minded about that."

Observers are quick to praise his work ethic, too. "I think Ron has an insatiable appetite for work," said Russell Giuntini, chief assistant to San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris. Noting Albers' boundless energy, Giuntini added, "I always ask him: 'What the heck do you eat?'"

Albers' personality seems suited to the assignment. Lawyers call his demeanor "friendly" and "welcoming."

"Many people haven't ever been treated like that in the court system," said San Francisco solo Michael Whelan Jr.

And Albers' empathy informs his decisions, lawyers said. "He's willing to give your client a lot of chances in the program if your client's willing to make an attempt," Franklin said.

But his patience isn't unlimited, Whelan said. "He gives up on people, but it takes a lot, and that's his unique gift and the unique setup of the Community Justice Center," Whelan said.

As an example, Whelan said, Albers recently showed "more than a willingness to send a client to state prison" after the man came into the Community Justice Center on a new motion to revoke probation. Albers had referred him to drug court, and the man had dropped out twice, so Albers sent the 49-year-old to prison.

Giuntini agreed that Albers is compassionate but willing to hold defendants accountable. "He's mindful of what justice for the community looks like and the need for public safety," Giuntini said.

Albers said it's too early for data to tell how effective the new court has been, but that he welcomes the feedback from the people he's serving. "The community should be able to tell us if we're being successful," Albers said. "The bright lights are on us."

