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## A Conversation with Former Presiding Justice Alice B. Gibney

For over four decades, the Rhode Island judiciary was indelibly shaped by the unwavering leadership and steadfast dedication of former Presiding Justice Alice B. Gibney, who retired in October 2025 following a distinguished 43-year career as a Rhode Island judge.

Appointed to the bench in 1982, Judge Gibney was one of the state's longest-serving judges and, in 2009, was elevated to Presiding Justice. Her esteemed tenure was marked by an uncompromised commitment to fairness and compassion that positively influenced generations of lawyers and judges. Judge Gibney cared deeply about her colleagues, loyal staff, and counsel who appeared before her (many of whom she knew by their first names). A role model for so many, Judge Gibney left an enduring legacy of public service to the State of Rhode Island that will not be forgotten.

When asked to reflect on Judge Gibney's remarkable career, Chief Judge John McConnell, United States District Court, District of Rhode Island, commented:

**"Judge Gibney will go down as one of Rhode Island's greatest judges because she served and governed with radical empathy. She always understood the human plight of the litigants and the lawyers—and administered justice and applied the rule of law accordingly. She was my mentor—and I often followed my brother Bob's advice, to just ask myself, 'What would Judge Gibney do?' and then the answer would guide me toward justice."**

Judge Richard Licht of the Rhode Island Superior Court remarked:

**"Judge Gibney and I have a long history together. We were admitted to the bar together, I chaired the Senate Committee that confirmed her, I tried cases before her, and for the last 11 years, I have worked with her and for her. As a trial justice, she was prepared, fair, smart, and decisive. As a colleague, she was always ready to discuss any issue with which I was grappling. She never told me what to do, but she provided the guideposts that led me to a decision. As Presiding Justice, she was accessible and responsive to my needs and concerns. What I found most impressive is how much she cared for the lawyers with whom she dealt. Lastly, as a friend, she always expressed interest in how my family (including our dog) was doing. All I can say is she is a great person."**

I had the great privilege of appearing before Judge Gibney in her courtroom and in chambers over the last 17 years. Following her retirement, I sat down with Judge Gibney to discuss her



Hon. Alice B. Gibney  
Retired RI Superior Court Presiding Justice

career, the people who shaped her principled leadership and decision-making style, and the lessons she hopes to pass on to Rhode Island's next generation of attorneys and judges.

***What or who inspired you to pursue law as a potential career?***

My grandfather was a solo practitioner. We were very close. He handled estates and probate work. On weekends, he would make "house-calls" and

would invite me along and always include me in the process. I'm sure at one time there were some codicils floating around West Warwick with the "attestation" of my eight-year-old self. It's a wonderful memory.

***Who were the role models or mentors who most influenced you and how did they impact your approach and leadership style?***

I had wonderful parents; both junior high school teachers. Different personalities, but alike in that they always saw the best in every student; no exceptions. In hindsight, I realized they gave me a great deal of leeway as I grew up. Very trusting. Bless their hearts.

When I was a new lawyer, Presiding Justice Weisberger, even then, had an outsized personality and intellect. Very formidable. However, I witnessed him very understated in circumstances that required attention, direction, and discretion. I was very impressed and have never forgotten it.

For years, I worked with and for Presiding Justice Rodgers. He became a dear friend. He was exceptionally bright and thorough. And he was inscrutable: an Irish Buddha. As P.J., he assigned some formidable cases/projects to me, several of which

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seemed daunting. I knew he'd be there for me if I had questions or needed anything. I also knew that he wasn't going to micro-manage or second-guess my decisions. His trust was empowering. Not a day goes by that I don't think about him.

*How would you describe your leadership style and decision-making as Presiding Justice in overseeing a large, complex state court system with varied and often demanding responsibilities?*

As to my style as Presiding Justice: I tried to be accessible, approachable, collaborative, and flexible. My door was always open. Literally. I wasn't a pushover, but I was user-friendly.

As to my decision-making: Just as I would remind jurors, I would have to remind myself not to be judgmental until it was time to be judgmental. Wait until all the post-trial paperwork was filed. There might be a nugget in there that could tip the balance.

Over the years, I had excellent law clerks. Aside from bright, I wanted those who could be crisp and pithy when they wrote. Those who could write *leanly*. We would discuss the case. I would tell them where I was headed and where I wanted to wind up. The clerk's job was to let me know if I was wrong... and why.

*During your tenure as Presiding Justice, was there a particularly challenging circumstance or moment that tested the Court and, in hindsight, became a source of pride?*

Covid was a huge challenge. But for Marisa Brown (Court Administrator) and her loyal posse who worked virtually 24/7,

I don't know that we would have weathered it as well as we did. The entire Superior Court stepped up and did exemplary work under extraordinary circumstances. It was our finest hour.

*You presided over many complex, sensitive, and serious matters. What challenges did those cases present?*

The cases that have meant the most are the saddest. Civil matters. Family tragedies involving death. Families ripped apart. Occasions when, at the request of all attorneys, I would meet with parties and family members. It could take days. There was ultimately resolution, but those were occasions when I've never felt more exhausted, nor more gratified.

*As you reflect on your distinguished career, what types of cases held personal significance or stood out most for you?*


Handling surrogacy cases was particularly gratifying. Couples who so wanted children but had been unable to, now had the opportunity. Gay couples, in particular, were able to become parents. I remember one case where the babies (twins!) arrived just before the hearing date and were in the courtroom when the Petition was put through. So not only did I get to meet the new fathers, I also got to see their twin daughters. The babies were beautiful, and the fathers were beside themselves. I had dozens of surrogacy experiences. They always just made my day. Those cases stand out for their pure happiness.

*Throughout your career, you have been recognized as a mentor and role model. What principles or lessons do you hope to pass on to the next generation of attorneys and judges?*

It behooves everyone to be firm in representation. No one expects you to be a pushover. It also behooves a trial lawyer to be gracious under pressure when dealing with an ill-behaved opponent (or ill-behaved judge, for that matter). No one likes a bully. Jurors notice a class act. They mention it in their juror evaluations. They've commented on it in my post-trial visits with them. They've asked for the phone number "of the nice lawyer." It's not trite. Good manners are noticed and appreciated and, when it comes to jury deliberations, can make a difference. It's an intangible that can be particularly rewarding.


*How do you hope your legacy will be remembered?*

I hope I'm remembered as someone who was fair, treated people well, and was patient. ◊



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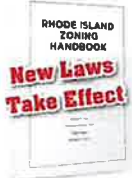
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