

In the Matter of the George and Jane Jetson Family Case No. 20??-0000-DM



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My weekday morning routine went fine. I got up at 5:30 a.m., ran three miles on the treadmill, got ready for work, woke the children at 7:00, gave them breakfast, and put them on the bus at 7:40. The sunrise here in the Upper Peninsula was beautiful. I walked 200 feet to my home office, took my black robe off the hook on the back of my door, put it on, shut the door, and logged into my secure portal.

My intern, a 3L from Detroit, has deposited 12 draft orders—one for each case on my docket this morning—into the portal per the instructions I left her two days ago. Her time logs show it took her two hours to draft the orders. She used the court system's document info-merge to streamline the process. Attorneys and self-represented parties must input essential information into the portal's intake form at the start of the case or they won't be able to electronically file documents on the case. They are expected to update information whenever it changes; each time they log in to their portal, they are reminded to do so. That information automatically populates draft orders, judgments, and other court documents.

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I review the orders and make some corrections and changes. I send my intern a note through the portal, briefly explaining the changes I made so she can learn more about family law, the area of law for my docket. She responds instantly, letting me know she will view this morning's docket using the public login authorization code which allows my courtroom to be a public place even though (thankfully) nobody is in my home office. Proceedings can be viewed from computer monitors, smartphones, tablets, and watches. Viewers get an access code by creating an account that requires them to provide their contact information, which improves security for me and those in my courtroom.

Because I can be more efficient and perform higher-quality work if I handle only one area of law, and because there are not enough cases in that practice area to keep me busy in the circuit where I live, I decide cases from many counties throughout the Upper Peninsula. We have revamped most of our old courtrooms into centers for public access to justice: State Bar section volunteers hold monthly seminars in the main courtrooms, several former offices with doors provide housing for 3Ls and newly graduated lawyers who are members of incubator law firms, and the old file room is a

walk-in clinic staffed by lay navigators who assist pro per litigants with Michigan's State Bar-approved online help source. The courthouse is most lively during our semiannual bench-bar days and annual open house, which all litigants and jurors from the year's cases are invited and encouraged to attend.

It is almost 10:00 a.m. and time to start my docket. On my computer screen, I see parties and attorneys for three cases are ready to go based on their electronic check-in. I push the conference button and four people appear on the screen before me: two attorneys and two parents, George and Jane Jetson, who have a post-judgment issue over parenting time. It seems Jane has gotten remarried and moved into her new husband's home in Gogebic County, while George is still living in Dickinson County. Jane has filed a motion for George to handle transportation of their boy, Elroy, for parenting time. Jane's lawyer is in his office in Southfield. George's lawyer is at an ABA convention in San Diego.

George and Jane found their lawyers using the State Bar's expanded, informative member directory, which serves as a personal website for every Bar member. Both lawyers included their credentials, experience, judges before whom they have appeared, courts in which they have appeared,

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articles and presentations they have authored, and their philosophies of practice. Neither Jane nor George chose their lawyer based on a self-generated, commercial rating. I've had both lawyers in my virtual courtroom before; they are well-prepared and competent.

"Good morning. Please state your appearances for the record," I say after identifying the case name and number.

A red flashing button on my computer screen tells me everything is recording properly. This morning's hearings are being saved to a statewide database. A transcript is being generated on my second monitor and, upon completion of the hearing, will be saved automatically in the electronic case file. This is very handy for a host of reasons, including preparing for appeals. In this moment, it helps me understand what one of the attorneys is saying; she is partially deaf, and her speech is somewhat difficult to understand. Meanwhile, she can read what I am saying on the split screen on her laptop.

"I have read the mother's motion and the father's response and I have no questions," I say. "Are there any new developments since you e-filed your documents?" The attorneys each make statements. I look over the order my 3L had generated for my review this morning. "One moment please," I tell them as I adjust the terms of the order to reflect the new developments.

I notice the father typing something into his computer. His attorney says, "Your Honor, the father has just informed me he would agree to the exchange location requested by the mother if she would give him an extra 15 minutes of parenting time for travel." I see the mother type a note into her computer. "The mother would agree to that," says the mother's attorney.

I further adjust the order and add my e-signature. I click the "publish" button on my screen and the order appears on the attorneys' and parties' computer screens while lodging itself in both the case portal and the state's central database.

"I have issued my order and hope this will improve the quality of life for both of you and your children," I tell the parents. I push the "conference" button again and my screen turns a lovely shade of blue, a

color known for its calming effect on the human psyche. My intern in Detroit posts a note on the portal that only I can see: "Nice to see two parents agree on something!" she says.

I am ready for the next case. The attorneys know they are on deck because their computers show the number of matters logged in ahead of them. They are presumably working on other matters while waiting for their case to be called, reducing the cost to the clients they represent. They could have viewed the previous hearing had they wished to do so by obtaining a login number at any time before or during the proceedings. In this case, they opted not to do so.

After completing my morning docket, I post my progress to the Supreme Court's central database so the Court can track the data pertaining to my courtroom. My login and logout times are recorded. Participants are invited to take a brief survey following their hearings to help the Court determine not only if I am conducting myself appropriately, but also to find out whether there were any technical glitches or other inconveniences.

It is time for lunch and to review a few files for this afternoon's docket. I should finish by 2:30 p.m., just in time to get the kids off the bus. I'm so glad the state allows judges to choose part-time dockets, providing they are not employed in other work. Although I have a lot of saving to do for my kids' college educations, spending time with them after school is priceless to them and me. Because the Court has so much data on different dockets, I was able to find one that was just right for me, allowing me to have the work-life balance I want at this time in my life. In a few years when the kids are older, I may apply for a more time-consuming, higher-paying docket, but for now, this is perfect.

I wrote this article in anticipation of the 21st Century Practice Task Force's report on the future of the legal profession, which will be issued in March. Who knows? Maybe it will start us down the path to a legal system that in the (perhaps not so distant?) future looks something like the fictitious one I dreamed up here. ■

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