

News

## Judge who heard Schiavo case now handles divorces

By **John Barry, St. Petersburg Times**

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**T**hree years later, the death threats have tapered off. No one in Congress has called him a murderer of late. To the best of his knowledge, the current governor of Florida isn't mad at him at all.

George Greer, the Pinellas-Pasco County circuit judge who presided over the Terri Schiavo case until her death in 2005, has a new assignment. He no longer judges guardianship cases. He judges divorce cases.

His transfer from probate/guardianship court to family court should allow Greer, 65, to serve the next three years in peaceful obscurity before his planned retirement.

Different issues

Nothing compares to the literal loss of a life that occurred at the end of the five-year Terri Schiavo struggle in Greer's court, but divorce cases are, in their own terrible ways, rife with life and death issues. Will dad ever see his kids again? Will mom survive financially? Will their children suffer the most?

On a recent Monday morning, a divorcing couple comes to see Greer. The last remaining dispute is the education of their 10-year-old daughter. She's in 5th grade in a Catholic school. Mother and father both wish she could stay there through the 8th grade.

But the father says he can't pay for even part of private school. He makes \$2,000 a month. He pays \$535 for child support, and \$600 for rent, plus he owes his lawyer \$5,000. He doesn't know what groceries are going to cost because, he explains, he never had to buy groceries when he had a wife.

The issue before Greer is: Should this child lose her school, her teachers, her friends, because her parents no longer love each other?

"This is what happens so often in divorce cases," Greer tells the couple. "The parents barely made ends meet when they were together. After divorce, they have to pay for two households."

He orders the father to pay an extra \$200 a month for the school tuition. The mother offers to front 100 percent of the other costs, for school uniforms, pencils, copy books.

The threats have tapered off. Greer's life is altered, in mostly good ways. But the threats have not been forgotten.

Greer is a proud grandfather who doesn't dare say publicly even what his grandchildren's names are or where they live.

He is nationally famous; he has 20 honors displayed in his chambers, almost all awarded during the Schiavo case. The largest is the 2005 President's Award of Merit from the Florida Bar, "for your unswerving commitment to the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the fundamentals of American democracy."

Robert Butterworth, former state attorney general, now secretary of the Department of Children and Families, says it's easy to get that chopped-liver feeling in Greer's presence.

Highly admired

Butterworth recalls a speech he gave at a Florida Bar conference in Orlando. He was flattered to see Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy sitting in the audience.

But suddenly Kennedy got up and marched out of the hall. Watching the doors swing shut behind the justice, Butterworth worried, "Why is he walking out on me?"

Kennedy later apologized. "Don't take it personally," he said. "I heard Judge Greer was outside, and I just had to meet him."

Other honors have been named after him. The Clearwater Bar Association created the George W. Greer Judicial Independence Award. In 2007, it gave the award to Judge Crockett Farnell.

It had special meaning for both men. Farnell was Greer's mentor when both presided over juvenile court. "He's a type A guy," Greer says. He taught Greer how to be tough.

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