

Judge says he's more helpful now

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SANFORD - The woman came to Seminole County Judge Ralph Eriksson wanting protection. A man was stalking her, she said. She had gone into hiding and needed a court order to keep him away.

Eriksson turned her away. She had brought no witnesses, he said, and therefore failed to prove her case.

The judge told the same thing to three other people that day: No witness, no injunction.

What he failed to do -- and it's one of the reasons he's now on trial -- was to tell those people they could testify on their own behalf.

Today is expected to be the last day of Eriksson's trial by the Judicial Qualifications Commission, the state agency that polices judges. He's accused of being vindictive and needlessly harsh to people who come to court without lawyers.

Eriksson, 61, of Longwood, a 13-year veteran of the bench, is expected to return to the stand today. He testified a little more than an hour Tuesday.

Just before lunch, the prosecutor in the case played a recording of a series of domestic-violence injunction hearings on Oct. 30, 2007. Not only did Eriksson not help the petitioners, he also made sarcastic remarks.

When one woman's cell phone went off, he asked whether she was too busy to appear in court. When another said her witness had failed to appear, Eriksson told her she should have issued a subpoena.

A third woman said she had run into the man from whom she wanted protection at a bar. Eriksson then asked the woman, a student, why she was in a bar. "Were you getting extra credit?"

"Demeaning the petitioner," said JQC General Counsel Michael L. Schneider. How did that help anyone?

"If I was demeaning, I apologize," Eriksson said.

He said he has since undergone psychological counseling and is now more helpful.

Eriksson also is accused of sending two men to jail out of spite. He ordered Daniel Bradshaw, 47, of Sanford, to jail after Bradshaw backed out of a guilty plea, saying he wanted to challenge the evidence against him.

Eriksson also revoked the bond and ordered Bob Lee Walton III to jail after he asked for a new judge, saying he wasn't sure he'd get a fair trial from Eriksson.

Walton, Eriksson said, was angling for a continuance that he didn't deserve.

"Was it fair, was it justice what you did to Mr. Bradshaw and Mr. Walton?" Schneider asked.

"I believe it was," Eriksson said.

Both men, he said, were trying to manipulate him and needlessly delay their trials.

In each of the complaints against him, Eriksson said, he had made a lawful decision.

Senior Circuit Judge Vernon Mize testified Tuesday that Eriksson had done nothing wrong.

Seminole County Judge Donald Marblestone also testified, saying he saw no evidence in the Bradshaw and Walton cases that Eriksson acted out of spite.

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