

Judge John (Jack) W. Bissell 2008 Professionalism Award Recipient, Third Circuit



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What do ice hockey and prescription drug patents have in common? Normally, it would be a stretch to connect the two; unless you are a former ice hockey referee and a federal district court judge who decided a case involving a major prescription drug patent. John W. Bissell, the 2008 Professionalism Award recipient for the Third Circuit, can lay claim to not only these distinctions, but a litany of other accomplishments in a life dedicated to the pursuit of professionalism.

Arbitrating legal disputes and hockey games have become routine for Judge Bissell. Shortly after his retirement from the federal bench, he joined the Roseland, New Jersey law firm of *Connell Foley, LLP*, as Of Counsel and Chair of its Alternative Disputes Resolution Department. In innumerable assignments as an arbitrator, mediator, or special master, Judge Bissell brings the same dedication to the principles of civility, professionalism and mutual respect among all participants that characterized the atmosphere in his courtroom.

Judge Bissell also maintains an avid appreciation for sports officiating and is currently the Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Association of Sports Officials, a membership association of approximately 16,000 officials in many sports at many levels. His focus as Chair has been the promotion of good sportsmanship as a means to develop good character. He has been affiliated with the National Ice Hockey Officials Association's Metropolitan New York Chapter since 1972, and served as a referee of high school and Division III College Ice Hockey until his retirement in 1999.

Born in Exeter, New Hampshire, "Jack" Bissell graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy, Princeton University, and the University of Virginia Law School. After a clerkship with New Jersey U.S. District Court Judge Arthur S. Lane, he began private practice with *Pitney, Hardin and Kipp* in Newark, interrupted by a stint as an Assistant U.S. Attorney and Chief of the Civil Division in the office of the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey. He returned to private practice until he was appointed in 1978 by Governor Brendan Byrne to the Essex County District Court, beginning a career as a jurist that would last 27 years. After a further year on the Superior Court of New Jersey, he was nominated by President Reagan in 1982 to the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey.

In 1985, after moving into new chambers in Newark, New Jersey, Judge Bissell was asked to become one of the initial Masters of the Bench of the Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. American Inn of Court, where he later became President.

He was instrumental in merging the Justice Brennan Inn with the Arthur T. Vanderbilt Inn to form the Brennan-Vanderbilt American Inn of Court in Newark, New Jersey. To this day, he instills the values of civility, professionalism and ethical conduct as a mentor and chair of a pupillage team. Those values come easy to him. In his courtroom, Judge Bissell promoted a formal but relaxed atmosphere. He emphasized that attorneys, parties, witnesses and jurors alike should be allowed to be as comfortable as possible in what for most of them was a strange setting. In return, however, the Judge expected all before him to be courteous, professional, and civil, both to the bench and to each other.

Judge Bissell eventually became the Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey. Three months later, he was to guide the Court in its response to the horrors of September 11, 2001, including the development of plans for enhanced security and emergency evacuation of its courthouses. He also became a member of the Commission on Professionalism established by the Supreme Court of New Jersey. He continues to serve actively as an advisor to that commission, most recently as a member of a subcommittee to define the commission's role in, and to develop a course on professionalism regarding a Continuing Legal Education requirement.

Judge Bissell's outstanding reputation is also demonstrated by the professional recognition he has been accorded. Notably, he is a recipient of the 2005 John F. Gerry Memorial Award from the Camden County Bar Association; the 2005 Association of the Federal Bar of the District of New Jersey William J. Brennan, Jr. Award; the 1988 Princeton University Class of 1962 award for Distinguished Public Service; and the 1971 U.S. Attorney General's Meritorious Service Award. His work was recently recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Seton Hall University School of Law Public Interest Network.

Asked about his passion for professionalism, Judge Bissell recalled how Justice Sandra Day O'Connor defined professionalism. He paraphrased her in this way: Professionalism is the combining of uncompromising effort to achieve substantive excellence in the practice of law with civility and respect toward all participants in the legal process. He continued that Justice O'Connor emphasized that those objectives are not antithetical, but that the true professional can and most pursue them both—the art of harmonizing. Since 1982, Judge Bissell has earned a reputation in New Jersey as one of the Dapper Dans of Harmony—a barbershop harmony chorus. Harmonizing appears to come naturally to this gifted peacemaker; and for that, we are a better profession. 