

## JUDICIAL PROFILE

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE: IRVING MUNICIPAL COURT

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Pictured above: (from left) The Honorable Laura Anderson, Irving; The Honorable Stewart Milner, Arlington; The Honorable Rodney Adams, Irving.

Irving Municipal Court Judge Laura L. Anderson became interested in traffic safety issues after attending the Texas Municipal Court Education Center (TMCEC)'s first Traffic Safety Conference in May 2008. Judge Anderson noted that one of Irving's key strategies is to improve motorist safety, which is an integral part of the city's overall goal of delivering exceptional services and promoting a high quality of life for its residents, visitors, and businesses. Judge Anderson believes the municipal court's role in enforcing traffic safety laws is especially important because Irving has a population of over 216,000 residents, not to mention countless drivers commuting on Irving's roadways. Irving's Municipal Court collaborates with other city agencies, civic groups, and community members to raise awareness of the importance of traffic safety, with an emphasis on educating students.

Judge Anderson and the Irving Municipal Court are dedicated to promoting a high quality of life and have developed a number of initiatives to educate members of the community about traffic safety. "Traffic safety issues can be resolved through education, engineering, and enforcement," said Judge Anderson. "As a judge, education is key. Municipal judges have a unique opportunity talk to young persons to empower them to buckle up." Judge Anderson frequently hands out "buckle up" stickers, coloring books, and other traffic safety materials to children she sees in the courthouse. The court dedicates an entire display board in their lobby to traffic safety. Last year, seven student groups visited Irving Municipal Court, where they learned about traffic safety. To further their outreach to the youth, the Court's Presiding Judge, Judge Rodney Adams has met with the Irving School District's Superintendent to discuss how to incorporate traffic safety within the curriculum. Additionally, court clerks participate in community events, such as the Community Fest, where they also hand out traffic safety materials to attendees.

Judge Adams and Judge Anderson are proud of Irving's Teen Court program, where juvenile offenders face a master jury for traffic-related offenses, such as driving without insurance. For cases where juvenile defendants are charged with an alcohol-related offenses, Judge Adams pioneered a program where the Irving Municipal Court partners with the Mothers against Drunk Driving (MADD) program. The Irving Municipal Court requires juvenile defendants charged with an alcohol-related offense to attend MADD's victim impact panels as part of their community service. The victim impact panels serve as a powerful reminder to offenders that impaired drivers put their own life as well as the lives of everyone on the roadways at high risk. Over 100 juvenile defendants have completed the program and several have told the court that hearing these personal stories from victims has had a profound impact on their perspective on drinking and driving.

To mark Municipal Court Week during November 7-11, 2011, the Irving Municipal Court launched an awareness campaign about the dangers of texting and driving. While all distractions can endanger drivers' safety, texting is the most alarming because it involves taking one's eyes off the road, hands off the wheel, and mind off the primary task of driving.<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown that drivers who text while driving display slower reaction times, have difficulty staying in their lane, and are less likely to see relevant objects, visual cues, exits, red lights, and stop signs.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a recent study by the Texas Transportation Institute determined that a driver's reaction time is doubled when distracted by reading or sending a text message.<sup>3</sup>

Young drivers appear to be especially prone to texting while driving. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the percentage of drivers visibly manipulating hand-held devices has been significantly higher among drivers ages 16 to 24 than those of other age groups.<sup>4</sup> An estimated five billion text messages are sent each day in the United States, and at least 20 percent of all drivers have admitted to texting while driving.<sup>5</sup> American teens send and receive an average of 3,300 texts per month, which is equivalent to more than six texts per hour that they are awake.<sup>6</sup> Nearly one in four American teens driving age say they have texted while driving, and almost half of all teens ages 12 to 17 say they've been a passenger while a driver has texted behind the wheel.<sup>7</sup> Drivers who type or read text messages contribute to at least 100,000 crashes each year, leading to thousands of preventable deaths.<sup>8</sup> Alarmed by the prevalence of texting, particularly among drivers, and especially younger, less experienced drivers, the court, in collaboration with the City of Irving, will focus on educating juvenile offenders and the community about the unnecessary risks associated with texting while driving.

Irving Municipal Court's activities to celebrate Municipal Court Week included an article in the City's publication, *The Spectrum*, focusing on the dangers of texting while driving. Additionally, they televised a victim impact panel comprised of individuals who have been affected by texting and driving on the City's television network, the Irving Community Television Network. The court also showed YouTube videos about what can happen when individuals text and drive on the video screens in the room where offenders waited for trial.

It is easy to see why the Irving Municipal Court has won the TMCEC Municipal Traffic Safety Initiatives Award three years in a row. Judge Anderson will continue her efforts by teaching a course about sexting, bullying, and online impersonation at several upcoming TMCEC municipal judges seminars.

For more information on how your municipal court can get involved in traffic safety, please contact the Texas Municipal Courts Education Center at [tmcec@tmcec.com](mailto:tmcec@tmcec.com).

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Transportation, D!STRACTION.GOV, Retrieved on September 30, 2011, from <http://www.distraction.gov/stats-and-facts/>

<sup>2</sup> FocusDriven, Get the Facts – Texting, Retrieved on September 30, 2011, from <http://www.focusdriven.org/texting>

<sup>3</sup> Texas Transportation Institute, New Study says Texting Doubles a Driver's Reaction Time, by Chris Sasser, (October 5, 2011), <http://tti.tamu.edu/2011/10/05/new-study-says-texting-doubles-a-driver%E2%80%99s-reaction-time/>

<sup>4</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Traffic Safety Facts, Research Note: Driver Electronic Use 2009, DOT HS 811 372 (September 2010), Retrieved from <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811372.pdf>