

**Remarks of
Chief Justice Annette Kingsland Ziegler
Supreme Court of Wisconsin**

2022 State Bar of Wisconsin Annual Meeting and Conference
June 16, 2022

I recognize it's not typical for the Chief Justice to give remarks at the start of the State Bar's Annual Meeting and Conference. Thank you for this opportunity.

We start this year's annual meeting on a somber note, with the news of a retired judge, John Roemer, being shot and killed in his Juneau County home. As Chief Justice John Roberts recently said in an email to me, "The murder of a model judge reverberates throughout our justice system and touches us all."

This topic was not on your agenda, and I never would have expected to be here discussing it today. However, Judge Roemer is on all our minds, and it's important to take some time to reflect on what happened and where we go from here.

The Wisconsin Judiciary is accustomed to saying "goodbye" to judges when they pass on. Each year during my State of the Judiciary speech, I pay tribute to those in our judicial community who have passed. It is solemn. Most of the judges listed have died of natural causes, often related to age and a life well lived. This year, Judge Roemer will be added to the list. But his story can't wait until the Judicial Conference, and although his life was well lived, it was cut far too short. His death was anything but ordinary.

I don't claim to be able to make sense of this. I cannot. It seems a bit beyond belief. I do not have all the answers, but it is time to think about broader protections. We need to acknowledge what happened and try to learn from it. Our judicial community and our legal community need to grieve together and pull together. The judiciary is a family. Many of us have no one else to talk with except our colleagues. The Bar is also a community with common interests. Even though you may be adversaries in a case, you are sisters and brothers in the law. We need to be each other's friends, now more than ever.

Judge Roemer was widely recognized as a great man who was very well liked. When his wife was ailing with cancer, he chose to retire from the bench to take care of her. He was a great father. He was a leader at his church and in the community. He was known by colleagues for his sharp legal mind and his willingness to share his time and knowledge with others. He found meaning in things that really matter in life, and these are the things we need to celebrate.

But we also know the judge appears to have been targeted by a past criminal defendant who years before had appeared in his courtroom. In other words, Judge Roemer appears to have been killed for having done his job as a judge.

We don't typically think of a judge needing to be on guard, for life. Unfortunately, we may need to rethink that.

This is not the only concerning act of this nature that we've heard about recently. Judges face far too many threats.

Last week, a man was arrested near U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's home at 1:15 in the morning. The suspect was reportedly armed with a gun, a knife, pepper spray, and zip ties. He allegedly told police he wanted to kill the justice.

In another incident in 2020, the son of United States District Court Judge Esther Salas was shot and killed at their New Jersey home by a former attorney who previously had a case before her court.

Each of these incidents is horrifying. The sad truth is these tragic events do not stand alone.

As Chief Justice, I had received some information about the circumstances of Judge Roemer's death earlier in the day the killing occurred. My initial reaction was disbelief, shock, sadness, and concern. This was unlike anything our state Judiciary has ever experienced.

However, at the time, there was little official information confirmed by authorities, and I was not going to be the person to confirm details publicly. In addition to having lost a court colleague, there was an investigation underway.

Eventually it was appropriate to issue a statement.

I want to thank outgoing State Bar President Cheryl Daniels for issuing a statement conveying thoughts we all have. She wrote, "Violence against judges threatens the sanctity of the judicial system, which is a primary function of our constitutional democracy. Judges play an important role in our civil society."

Judges should not be threatened or intimidated, or fear harm for doing their job. The primary role of a judge is to help peacefully resolve legal disputes presented to the court. Whether people agree with decisions or not, it is important to respect the important role of the judiciary.

There is nothing more abhorrent to the justice system and the cause of justice than what occurred in Juneau County June 3, or, in any incident where a judge is threatened, intimidated, or attacked in an effort to seek revenge or to change the outcome of a case.

These incidents remind us that all judicial officers and officers of the court need to be vigilant and take safety and security precautions. We can't let threats, intimidation, or violence affect our decision making on the bench.

Judicial decisions are based on the law and the facts of a case. These are not decisions based on personal opinion or preference. And judges don't go out looking for cases; they are brought to the court by one of the parties. Believe me, I'd prefer not to have some of the controversies that are brought to us.

Anyone who has spent much time working in a courtroom knows emotions can run high. And everyone who comes to a courthouse, including judges, lawyers, staff, and the public, needs to feel safe and be safe.

The personal security of judges and court security need to be a top priority for the court system. It's a priority for me, not only as Chief Justice, but as a former circuit court judge.

The court system provides resources and training opportunities to judges and other court-security officials at annual conferences and other events. We've added this to training for all new judges, as well. I have asked that our Legislative Committee explore legislation that could better protect

judges and their families. We have Chapter 68 of our supreme court rules to guide local jurisdictions on Court Security and Facilities.

The Director of State Courts Office has helped organize and present an annual court safety and security conference in partnership with the National Criminal Justice Training Center at Fox Valley Technical College, where experts in law enforcement, state and federal attorneys, judges and other court services professionals provide tools and resources on security planning, jury and witness safety, and threat assessment and management, among other topics.

Other training presentations have been available annually at our Wisconsin Judicial Conference, and we have reminded judges of security training that is available statewide. Individual jurisdictions have set up security training and even sister states have been collaborating with us. Judge Roemer's death was tragic. His family, his community and his church are all shaken. It's a loss the Judiciary will never truly recover from. But this tragic event serves as a vivid reminder that we all need to be vigilant and strive for security for judges, lawyers, litigants, juries, staff, and the public at large. We *must and will* move ahead more aware of the importance of our safety and security and the role judges play in our justice system and a civil society.

We owe that to Judge Roemer.

Now, please have a good and safe conference. Thank you for your time.