



STATE OF TENNESSEE
BOARD OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT

September 28, 2020

Mailing Address:
P.O.Box 92276
Nashville, TN 37209

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615-253-1470

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

Judge Jere Ledsinger
300 Hillsboro Blvd.
Manchester, TN 37355

Re: Ethics Complaint
File No. B20-8233

Dear Judge Ledsinger:

This letter shall serve as a public reprimand pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated section 17-5-303(e)(2)(B)(i)(c).

On or about July 16, 2020, you made an inappropriate comment to a courtroom audience consisting of criminal defendants, some of whom were African-American. Specifically, referring to the Tennessee Supreme Court's requirement that face coverings be worn in court, you stated, "the Grand Wizard of our Supreme Court said we have to wear these masks" or words to that effect.

In a letter dated August 24, 2020, you admitted that you made the statement, explaining that your words were intended to "soften any resistance by those present in the courtroom to the requirements of wearing a mask, as we have had negative feedback to this [Supreme Court] mandate." You acknowledged that you were wrong to make the statement and that you meant no disrespect to anyone.

On September 5, 2020, an investigative panel of this Board authorized a full investigation into this matter pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated section 17-5-303(c)(3). In a letter dated September 8, 2020, you were given notice of the panel's decision to authorize the investigation as required by Tennessee Code Annotated section 17-5-303(d)(1).

In addition to your written response, you had a phone conversation with Disciplinary Counsel on September 23, 2020, to discuss this matter. During this conversation, you acknowledged the perception problem with your comment and reiterated your regret in making it. You emphasized that the comment was spontaneous and that you intended no disrespect.

Judges are expected to maintain the highest standards of conduct and dignity of judicial office at all times. Preamble, Tenn. Sup. Ct. R. 10. This obligation includes the specific responsibility of avoiding words or conduct that manifest bias or prejudice. Tenn. Sup. Ct. R. 10, RJC 2.3(B). A participant in a legal proceeding who hears racially insensitive comments, such as the one involved here, may reasonably perceive that the judge is biased or prejudiced, regardless of whether bias or prejudice actually exists. It is essential that all persons appearing in our courts have confidence that the judge will dispense justice respectfully and fairly. Comments like the one at issue do not inspire such confidence.

In addition, judges must be dignified and courteous to those with whom they deal in an official capacity. Tenn. Sup. Ct. R. 10, RJC 2.8(B). The statement involved here, said in open court, is neither dignified nor courteous.

Further, judges are required to act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary and must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety. Tenn. Sup. Ct. R. 10, RJC 1.2. Comments like the one at issue undermine public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the legal process, especially for those persons who, after hearing an insensitive comment from the judge, have their cases adjudicated by that judge. Such persons may reasonably question whether they received impartial and unbiased treatment even though, as here, there is nothing to suggest bias or prejudice in any case.

Finally, in addition to the racial insensitivity of your comment, the comment impugned a higher court. While there is no evidence to doubt your assertion that you had no intent to cast aspersions on any member of the Tennessee Supreme Court or anyone else, those who heard your comment have no way of determining your intent apart from the words used. Once such comments are made, the damage is done.

The investigative panel decided to impose a public reprimand, which you have accepted. In imposing this particular sanction, the panel considered that you have acknowledged the problem with your comment and that you fully cooperated with Disciplinary Counsel throughout this matter.

In short, comments such as the one involved here, even if made off-the-cuff and with no intent to be offensive, reflect an ethical lapse that undermines public confidence that our judges are unbiased in fact and in appearance. The Board trusts that the reprimand imposed today will result in an elevated consciousness about how to approach this and similar situations going forward.

Sincerely,

Dee David Gay
Board Chair

