

# Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

## Bowen: With new judge, a 13-year-old wrong is righted



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Declan Mansfield gets a new title next week: your honor.

Mansfield has been both a prosecutor and defense counsel, but he moves from making arguments to making rulings as the newest circuit court judge in the 6th Judicial Circuit, covering Pasco and Pinellas counties. In mid December, Gov. Rick Scott appointed him to complete the term of Judge William Webb, who retired Dec. 31.

Mansfield's docket is civil and foreclosure cases, and he gets no dry runs. There is a trial scheduled for Monday in his courtroom — his first day on the bench after attending training sessions at judges' school in Tallahassee.

But, he is hardly a neophyte. At 64, he can only serve six years before mandatory retirement, and he'll need to run for election in three years when the current term expires.

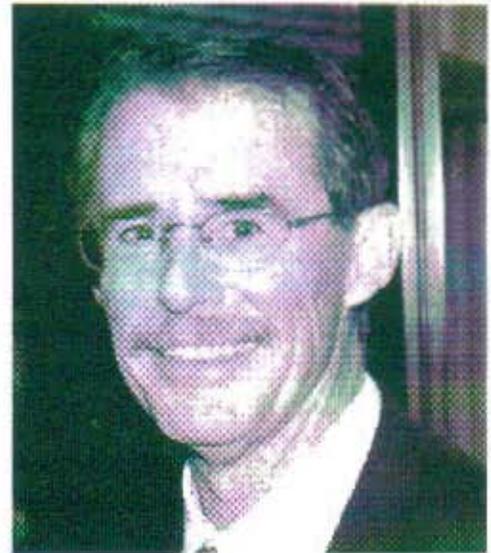
Getting the new job completed a good 2015 for Mansfield. He also is a newlywed. Six months ago, he and Pasco Circuit Court Clerk and County Comptroller Paula S. O'Neil married. It's the second marriage for both.

Pasco's power couple? Mansfield laughs at the suggestion.

He's had the chance to laugh and smile a lot the past few weeks. The appointment is the culmination of a yearslong pursuit to become a judge. He has been on the short list of finalists three times previously without getting the gubernatorial nod. He was considering a second political run for the bench, but it was derailed by a family tragedy — his first wife, Cathy, died unexpectedly after a stroke in July 2011.

His first campaign for a judicial seat in 2002 is notorious. It disintegrated into an ugly spectacle that saw the Florida Supreme Court remove the winner, John Renke III, from the bench and suspend the law license of Renke's father, onetime state Rep. John Renke II, for illegal campaign contributions and other improprieties.

Mansfield, meanwhile, had to sit on the sidelines and wonder "what if?" He had been the presumed favorite — a well-known and well-liked former assistant state attorney who had built a successful private practice in criminal defense and civil litigation. Renke III was just 33 at the time, had been a lawyer for only seven years and was an unknown entity inside the West Pasco Judicial Center. He did research, not oral arguments. His father,



Declan Mansfield, 64, was appointed by the governor to complete a retired judge's term

however, had risen to minority leader of the Florida House of Representatives and was a bare-knuckles brawler when it came to political campaigns.

They misrepresented the younger Renke's qualifications and sent a campaign mailer critical of Mansfield for providing legal counsel to people accused of crimes. The candidates split the vote in Pasco County, but the younger Renke captured a 10,000-vote plurality in Pinellas County to win the seat.

Though, by state law, judicial races are nonpartisan, the Republican Executive Committee of Pasco laundered campaign contributions to finance mailers supporting Renke and other judicial candidates. The Florida Elections Commission eventually fined the party \$3,000 for the chicanery.

That paled compared to the Renkes' financial misdeeds. The father gave an illegal \$98,500 loan to his son's campaign and disguised the payments as compensation for earned legal fees. The Florida Supreme Court kicked the younger Renke off the bench in 2006 and blasted the father in a 2009 order and 60-day suspension that said the unlawful campaign contributions "constituted a third-degree felony although you were never criminally prosecuted." The elder Renke's conduct "diminished the public's perception of not only you and your son, but all members of the Florida Bar," it said.

So, Mansfield should chuckle these days. He's getting the proverbial last laugh.

"I feel great about the appointment," he said in a telephone interview last week. "You can't let things that happened in the past bother you. If you dwell on that, you won't be successful."

It also must be noted that a governor, who so often appears politically tone deaf, righted a 13-year-old wrong by appointing Mansfield to the bench.

"The governor did get it right," said Pasco Tax Collector Mike Fasano, a frequent critic of Scott's administration. Mansfield, meanwhile, calls the judgeship his dream job.

"I want to become the judge that I've always wanted to be," he said. "Be fair and open-minded and be fair to the county. That's always what I've wanted. And, given this opportunity, I'm glad to make the most of it."

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