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Skakel Case Will Test Decisiveness of Judge

Muddled murder case faces Moxley juvenile court judge

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The complex juvenile law issues present in the Martha Moxley murder case confound even the most astute legal minds. But Michael Sherman, attorney for defendant Michael Skakel, is certain of one thing: Juvenile Matters Judge Maureen D. Dennis will likely clarify the law with articulate and even-handed rulings.

"From what I know about Maureen Dennis, she is a bright lady," Sherman said. "She's an ex-public defender in Norwalk. You go through the test of fire in the Norwalk public defender's office."

Dennis recently postponed Skakel's arraignment -- scheduled for Feb. 8 at Stamford, Conn., Juvenile Court -- until March 14 to give her time to determine whether to allow the media access to the proceedings.

Repeated phone calls to reach Dennis for comment were not returned.

Dennis, 47, a Boston native who has lived most of her life in Connecticut, received a bachelor's degree in French at the University of Connecticut in 1974, according to her official biography distributed by the Connecticut Judicial Branch.

She earned her law degree from UConn School of Law in 1979.

Dennis was an assistant public defender in the early 1980s in the Judicial Districts of Danbury and Stamford-Norwalk, according to the court biography.

From 1983 to 1993, Dennis was an attorney with Whitman & Ransom in Greenwich. From December 1993 until September 1994, she was an attorney with Sandak, Friedman, Sommer, MacMillan & Lucas in Stamford.

Dennis developed an expertise in family law during her private practice, colleagues said.

"She had the respect of clients and her colleagues," said Gary A. MacMillan, partner at both firms. "She was articulate and appropriately aggressive."

"She knew when to be tough," he added.

Dennis did not succumb to exhausting domestic cases that frequently involve bitter divorces and custody battles, MacMillan said. "You have to have a proper perspective

when dealing with the domestic practice so it doesn't eat you up," he said. "She had the right attitude for it."

"She handled the full gamut of family law matters" added Sandak, Friedman partner Jay H. Sandak.

In September 1994, Dennis left Sandak, Friedman to join the Superior Court bench after she was nominated to the post by then-Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr.

"I knew she would be a fine judge," Sandak said. "She's well-suited to be a judge. She's very bright; she has the right demeanor. She's open-minded."

Dennis got her initiation primarily working the criminal docket in New Haven, Norwalk and Danbury, according to the court biography. She also handled family matters in Danbury in the early stages of her judgeship.

In 1995, she was moved over to the juvenile bench in the Danbury and Litchfield Judicial Districts. In 1997, she took over as Juvenile Matters Judge in the Judicial District of Stamford-Norwalk.

"She's an excellent jurist," said Daniel P. Weiner, a juvenile law specialist in Stamford. "She's intelligent and fair. She's listens very carefully to everything that's said."

Weiner has lost his share of cases in Dennis's court, but he has no complaints about the judge's rulings.

"She's always ruled in a fair way -- even when she's ruled against me," he mused.

But Dennis' skills will be put to the test in the Skakel case. Two problematic issues may be raised by the defense -- whether the statute of limitations in effect in 1975 bars the state's murder charge and whether Skakel is amenable to rehabilitation and, thus, not subject to adult court jurisdiction.

Dennis also is not accustomed to media scrutiny, having worked under the veil of secrecy in juvenile court the past five years.

But there is no reason why Dennis cannot handle the complexity of the case and the media glare, MacMillan said. "There are any number of [judges] right for this case," he said. "But no one should be concerned about Judge Dennis hearing this case."

"She's not going to give in to anybody," Sherman added.