



Emmet County News Release

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FOC Maurine Watts Retires After Four Decades Serving Emmet County Families

The longest-serving Friend of the Court in Michigan left a job she loved last week to take on a new challenge – retirement.

Maurine Watts has seen people at their absolute worst and best in her 41 years working for Emmet County, and through all those years, she's continued to approach life and work with compassion. Her friendly disposition and professionalism set a tone in the Friend of the Court (FOC) office, where she was generous with her time and knowledge, according to several of her employees.

Circuit Court Judge Charles W. Johnson echoed the sentiments of the FOC staff.

"Maurine has made a positive difference in the lives of countless families and children," Judge Johnson said, adding that "she has been a genuine pleasure to work with, and I wish her all the best for a long and rewarding retirement."

Even the new Friend of the Court seemed sincerely sad that Watts was leaving.

"Maurine has been a wealth of knowledge during our training time together," said Amanda Guarisco, who is replacing Watts as FOC.

"Her experience and longevity in this position have proven to be a great asset to me while learning about my new position. Although my time with her has been short, she has given me confidence that I will be successful in continuing the amazing work Friend of the Court does for the families within our community. I look forward to carrying on her legacy for years to come."

Watts' ability to help others gain the confidence and understanding needed to handle tough situations has been a boon to her staff and the clients the FOC serves. Her long career has provided ample experiences that put life's challenges in perspective.

After graduating from Alma College in 1977, Watts earned a master's degree in counseling from Central Michigan University in 1979. That same year, she took on the position of in-home care worker for the county's Probate Court and set up an office in what was then a closet. The county building did not yet have an elevator and there were no computers sitting on any desktops. She learned just about every back road in Emmet County as she traveled alone, without a cellphone or even a pager then, to check in on families under the court's purview.



“You were all on your own then,” Watts said about her early years as an in-home care worker. “I’ve been verbally abused and physically assaulted and even talked my way out of being held hostage. I visited homes with rats in the bathtubs, goats in the kitchen, and dealt with some of the worst abuse cases the county has ever seen.”

Domestic and child abuse were taboo subjects to discuss in public then and well-established organizations to help victims did not exist in northern Michigan. In a heart-wrenching case, which drew widespread news coverage, Watts and another probate care worker rallied other county employees to raise money to buy the abused kids some Christmas presents. They two women raised so much they were able to purchase beds and other essentials for the kids who had been moved to a foster home.

County employees then asked Watts if there were others needing help and soon the WeCare Fund was created. Each November, county employees hold a fundraiser in the Board of Commissioners room to boost the fund and donations to WeCare are accepted throughout the year that go to help those in need, including county employees and their families.

After being promoted to Juvenile Officer, Watts served two years and then was tapped to be the county’s Friend of the Court in 1987. A death threat just a month into her new job did not scare her off from continuing to do whatever she could to assist families during some of the most difficult times of their lives.

As social programs developed over the years, Watts was quick to get the appropriate training and then implement in Emmet County.

“I’ve seen the FOC go from strictly an enforcement perspective to one more family-focused on all levels,” Watts explained. “Court orders now address more joint custody, more parenting time, and the issues of alcohol and drug use, lack of housing, gambling, and domestic violence. The FOC staff tries to keep everyone focused on the children.”

Watts developed and implemented a domestic relations mediation program for the county’s FOC office, which has had over a 90% success rate each year since its inception. She served on the governor’s task force for domestic violence and helped to develop the implementation of personal protection statutes and orders.

While it is true Watts has experienced many tough situations others only see in movies, she said she’s also had the privilege of seeing clients overcome alcoholism, drug abuse, and surviving suicide attempts.

“You didn’t always know if you made a difference, but when you heard of the successes of former clients, you knew it was worth it.”

Based on the many compliments she received from her staff and fellow county co-workers, it’s obvious Watts made a huge difference. Her knack for teaching, comforting, and encouraging others will be hard to replace, but her success has created a group of people in FOC who will no doubt continue to approach their work with compassion and understanding.

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