



Supreme Court of Illinois

February 10, 2020

JUSTICE ROBERT R. THOMAS ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT FROM ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT

Justice Robert R. Thomas has announced his retirement from the Illinois Supreme Court effective Feb. 29, 2020. Justice Thomas, 67, became the first Chief Justice from DuPage County when he was elected to that post from 2005-2008. One of the major accomplishments during Justice Thomas' tenure as Chief was the establishment of the Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, an outgrowth of the Special Supreme Court Committee on Civility, which was formed in 2001.

"Justice Thomas was the Chief when I joined the court and he cultivated a welcoming and professional environment. His great sense of humor made a challenging job more enjoyable for everyone," Chief Justice Anne M. Burke said. "He led key court initiatives in the areas of professionalism, civility, continuing legal education and transparency. On behalf of the Supreme Court and the entire Judicial Branch, we thank him for his service to the judiciary and wish him the best in the next stage of his storied career."

"It has been a great honor and privilege to have served on the Illinois Supreme Court as well as on the appellate and circuit courts over the past 32 years," Justice Thomas said. "While I will miss the collegial atmosphere with my colleagues on the court, I am ready to return to the practice of law and help clients achieve justice."

Justice Thomas continued, "I am especially grateful for the support and hard work of my staff. I've had the same team working with me for nearly 20 years – my administrative assistant Vicki Kravcar, and my law clerks Mick Penosky, Shannon Sullivan, Craig Belford, and John Werner. They're the best team any judge could ask for, and I will miss working alongside them."

Justice Thomas will join the Power Rogers law firm where he will practice with his son, Jonathan. Justice Thomas was represented by firm co-founder Joe Power in a successful 2006 defamation case against the *Kane County Chronicle*.

"The Lord has truly blessed me. Starting with my fantastic wife, Maggie, three great kids, Brendan, Jonathan and Jessica, and eight soon to be nine grandchildren. With a football career that included a National Championship at Notre Dame and 10 years with the Chicago Bears," Justice Thomas said. "With the tremendous honor and privilege of serving as Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court. And now, the opportunity to practice law at Power and Rogers with my

son, Jonathan, alongside the best trial lawyer in the country, my close friend, Joe Power. I have been truly blessed.”

“I am honored to have represented Justice Thomas as a client and I’m thrilled that he is joining our firm as a partner,” Power said. “He has become a very good friend and I will treasure having him around the office. Bob has a well-deserved reputation as a brilliant jurist, but unfortunately due to our friendship and my representation of him I was never privileged to argue a case in front of him. But nevertheless, I will now enjoy practicing law with him.”

The Supreme Court has constitutional authority to fill interim judicial vacancies and has appointed Appellate Justice Michael J. Burke to fill Justice Thomas’ seat effective March 1 through Dec. 5, 2022. Justice Burke has been a member of the Second District Appellate Court since 2008. DuPage County Circuit Judge Liam Brennan has been assigned to the Second District Appellate Court, effective March 2 through Dec. 5, 2022.

Justice Thomas was born in Rochester, New York. He received his B.A. in Government from the University of Notre Dame in 1974, and was named an Academic All-American that same year. For three seasons, Justice Thomas was the starting placekicker for the University of Notre Dame football team. In the 1973 Sugar Bowl, Justice Thomas kicked the winning field goal in Notre Dame’s 24-23 victory over the University of Alabama, thereby clinching the AP National Championship for the Irish.

Following his graduation from Notre Dame, Justice Thomas played 12 seasons in the National Football League, 10 of them with the Chicago Bears. In the 1977 season, Justice Thomas kicked a 28-yard overtime field goal that sent the Bears to the playoffs for the first time in 14 years, and he remains the fourth leading scorer in Chicago Bears history.

Justice Thomas’ unique career in both football and the law will be highlighted in the soon-to-be released biography, *A View From Two Benches: Bob Thomas in Football and the Law*. Renowned sportswriter Doug Feldman and former Bears head coach Mike Ditka (foreword) chronicle how Justice Thomas reached the top of two distinct professions. It is available for presale on [Amazon](#).

While still playing for the Chicago Bears, Justice Thomas enrolled in and attended Loyola University School of Law, where he often was seen studying after practice and between games. He was admitted to the Illinois Bar in 1981, and he spent the next seven years in private civil practice with several firms.

In 1988, Justice Thomas was elected Circuit Judge of the 18th Judicial Circuit, which is comprised of DuPage County. While with the Circuit Court, Justice Thomas presided over civil jury trials and was appointed acting Chief Judge from 1989 to 1994. In 1994, Justice Thomas was elected to the Illinois Appellate Court for the Second Judicial District, where he continued to serve until his election to the Illinois Supreme Court in November 2000.

“Justice Thomas has been a great colleague and, although we did not always agree on every issue that came before the Court, we became and remained good friends who respected each other and

our differing perspectives,” Justice Lloyd A. Karmeier said. “His departure will be a great loss for the Court, for the People of Illinois, and for me, personally. Members of the bar will remember him for his clear thinking, insightful analysis and forceful writing. Those of us who served with him will miss him for his good humor, collegiality, and intellectual thinking.”

Justice Karmeier continued, “Bob was unwavering in his dedication to the highest standards of professional and civic responsibility. He was utterly committed to protecting and improving our system of justice. His faith in the potential of the court system was infectious. He was always certain we could do better, and because of that certainty, we usually did. It has been a privilege to serve with him.”

Justice Thomas was elected by his colleagues on the Supreme Court to serve as Chief Justice from 2005-2008, making him the first Chief Justice from DuPage County in the Court's nearly 200-year history. Upon his installation as Chief Justice, Thomas acknowledged the path that had brought him there: “Having served in both the trial court and the appellate court, I will never lose sight of the fact that the decisions rendered by the Supreme Court represent a mere sliver of the work that occupies the Illinois courts. Every day, in courtrooms from Lake County to Alexander County, decisions are rendered that will never be published, will never make headlines, and will never be reviewed by the Illinois Supreme Court. But these decisions are important, nonetheless. For they, as much as any decision rendered by the Illinois Supreme Court, affect the lives of real people.” Thomas then committed himself to “serving the cause of justice, to walking humbly, and to never losing sight of the tremendous privilege that it is to wear the judicial robe, and to serve the people of this State.”

The Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism promotes principles of integrity and civility among all Illinois lawyers and judges. “You hear a lot about how the practice of law is different now than in days past when a lawyer’s handshake meant something and a lawyer’s word was his bond,” Justice Thomas said when recommending the Committee. “That may be an oversimplification, but in this day and age with competition in the profession for dollars and clients, activities sometimes degenerate into a Rambo-style, win-at-all cost attitude by attorneys.”

Also during Justice Thomas’s tenure as Chief Justice, the Court gave special attention to the implementation of information technologies that advance the services and functions of the Illinois courts. Among the most visible improvements was the streaming of the Court’s oral arguments in video and audio format on the Court’s website. The arguments are posted on the website shortly after they are formally heard by the Supreme Court.

Justice Thomas’s tenure as Chief Justice also saw the Illinois Supreme Court implement for the very first time a program of mandatory continuing legal education for all active Illinois lawyers and judges.

In his time on the Illinois Supreme Court, Justice Thomas has authored numerous notable opinions, including *People v. Lerma* (2016), which held that expert testimony concerning the reliability of eyewitness identifications is appropriate in certain cases; *DeHart v. DeHart* (2013), which for the first time recognized the theory of equitable adoption in Illinois; *Ryan v. The*

Board of Trustees of the General Assembly Retirement System (2010), which held that, as a result of his multiple federal felony convictions, former Governor George H. Ryan had forfeited the pensions he earned while serving in the General Assembly and as Lieutenant Governor; and *People ex rel. Madigan v. Snyder* (2005), which affirmed the constitutionality of former Governor Ryan's grant of "blanket clemency" to all 167 of Illinois' death row inmates.

"I can't imagine a better legal education than serving alongside Justice Thomas these past 20 years," said Thomas's law clerk, Craig Belford. "He has authored hundreds of decisions spanning every facet of Illinois law, and his influence will be felt long after he's left the court."

Justice Thomas was named DuPage County Bar Association's Lawyer of the Year in 2001. In 2005, the Illinois Judges Association honored him with their "Professionalism Award." He received Loyola University's Distinguished Jurist Award in 2006 and was named "Judge of the Year" in 2008 by the Illinois Chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates.

In 1999, the NCAA Honors Committee selected Justice Thomas for the prestigious NCAA Silver Anniversary award, which recognizes former student-athletes who have distinguished themselves since completing their college athletics career 25 years ago. In September 2012, he was inducted into the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame.

Justice Thomas and his wife, Maggie, reside in Glen Ellyn. They have three children and eight grandchildren with another on the way.

Justice Michael Burke began his career in the DuPage County State's Attorney's Office in 1983, becoming Chief of the Special Prosecutions Unit in 1991. He joined the judiciary as an Associate Judge in 1992. He was appointed to the Circuit Court in 2001 and elected in 2002. Justice Burke is noted for his extensive involvement in his community and profession. He has consistently received a high approval rating from the Illinois State Bar Association and the DuPage County Bar Association. He graduated with highest distinction from John Marshall Law School and *Magna Cum Laude* from Northern Illinois University.

Judge Brennan began his career in private practice before joining Illinois Supreme Court Justice James D. Heiple's office as Senior Law Clerk. He joined the DuPage County State's Attorney's Office in 1998, becoming Supervisor of the Child Abuse/Domestic Violence Unit in 2007. Judge Brennan became an Associate Judge in 2008 and a Circuit Judge in 2014, where he currently serves as Presiding Judge of the Felony Division. He received his law degree from Loyola University Chicago and his undergraduate degree from the University of Notre Dame.