



AJA MEMBER PROFILE

Debra H. Lehrmann
District Judge, 360th Judicial District
Fort Worth, Texas

Judge Debra Lehrmann said that it was “an interest in people” that drew her to study psychology. She earned a B.A. in that field from the University of Texas in 1979. But what she called an “eye-opening” experience influenced her to combine that degree with a J.D.

She worked at Austin State Hospital as part of an internship, where she encountered many mentally ill patients who simply weren’t getting any better. Many of these patients had been abused as children. “I’d rather be able to help people where I could see some tangible benefits,” she said. So, she earned her J.D. from the University of Texas School of Law in 1982.

Judge Lehrmann has devoted much of her career on and off the bench to working to ensure the welfare of children in divorce cases. She served as a lead attorney (later director of enforcement) for the Tarrant County Domestic Relations Office (1983-85), and started her judicial career as a IV-D master for all Tarrant County Family Law Courts in 1987. She became an associate judge of the 360th Judicial District in 1991 and a district judge in 2000.

She believes that judges need to think beyond their “traditional” role of listening to evidence objectively and rendering just decisions. They have to realize that an important part of their role is to ensure that courts don’t make a bad situation worse.

“Courts are now starting to recognize that the system should add no conflict to the situation [in a divorce proceeding],” Judge Lehrmann said. “[We must] expand our vision of what the adversarial system encompasses.

“[It’s] very important that the system allows parents to be parents,” and not just adversaries, she said.

“In the vast majority of family law cases,” she wrote in an article published in the *Texas Bar Journal* (November 2002), “the families and children are best served when the parents are able to resolve their cases through conciliatory means and develop their own co-parenting plans,” rather than focusing on “who is the better parent.”

Kids also need to be heard outside of adversarial proceedings. “Children,” she wrote, “are more apt to accept a parenting plan that takes their views into account . . . rather than one that is imposed upon them.”

Judge Lehrmann has been working to help clarify the law regarding representation of children in divorce proceedings through the Texas Legislative Ad Hoc Ad Litem Committee. This committee consists of judges, law and ethics professors, and lawyers, who are working to clarify how lawyers can best serve the interests of children. The work of this committee will be important not only in Texas, but nationwide, she said.

Tarrant County is also taking the lead with its Access Facilitation Program, says Judge Lehrmann. This program, which is funded by a grant from the Texas Attorney General’s Office, aims to head off custody and access disputes before they get out of hand. Parents are encouraged to meet with mental health professionals and social services before going to trial. So far, the “response from litigants has been overwhelmingly positive,” she said, often because many of those who have gone through the program feel that they have had their views heard for the first time.

Judge Lehrmann is also the president-elect of the Texas Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliatory Courts. [bm](#)