

From Russia, With Love: Rehab Aspect of U.S. Judicial System Impresses Visitors

By Claude Walbert
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO — A Russian judge who observed San Diego courts last week is taking home new ideas about juvenile justice, and she plans to do something about it.

Svetlana P. Serova, one of six Russian judges who spent a week observing federal and state courts in San Diego, said it was "amazing" to see the way California's juvenile judges can guide budding thugs away from a life of crime.

"In our system, in delinquency cases, the courts play only the role of imposing punishment," said Serova, speaking through an interpreter. "In this system here, the courts participate in the delinquent's life and try to create a better life for the delinquent through various programs. So they're trying to work not only on punishing the delinquent but also on building a possible future for him."

But a similar emphasis on rehabilitation isn't possible in Russia without a change in the laws, she said.

"Currently, it is not in our statutes, and we're guided by the statutes only," Serova said.

However, judges play a strong role in laws formulated in the Duma, or legislature, she said.

"The people's deputies to the Duma in St. Petersburg work closely with the judges," Serova said. "Therefore, although I am not a lawmaker myself, my opinion counts."

Serova, 42, is assistant chairwoman of the Primorsky District Court in St. Petersburg. After Russian President Boris Yeltsin appointed her to the bench in 1995, she rose to membership on the Qualifying Collegium of Judges, which recommends candidates for judgeships and disciplines wayward judges.

The St. Petersburg district has 800 judges watched over by the collegium, which has 14 members from the judiciary and seven from area lawyers.

"Recently, we had elections, and I asked to be relieved of that honorable mission," Serova said.

Other members of the delegation to San Diego were Valery

Gerasimov, deputy chairwoman of the Ivanovo Regional Arbitration Court; Tatyana Kubareva, Tver Regional Court judge; Olga Loginova, Vologda Regional Arbitration Court judge; Marina Rodnyanskaya, Tver Regional Court judge; and Nikolay Zakharov, Lipetsk Regional Court judge.

Their trip to California was sponsored by the Open World Leadership Center at the Library of Congress under its Rule of Law program. In San Diego, their host was the Citizen Diplomacy Council of San Diego.

San Diego County Superior Court Judge Yuri Hofmann met with his six Russian counterparts as they wrapped up four days in San Diego observing U.S. District Court, Bankruptcy Court and Superior Court.

Hofmann, who speaks Russian, said the six are "curious, very bright, very hardworking judges, picked because of their ability, the cream of the crop."

He said the Russians were particularly interested in courts devoted



Gesturing, San Diego Superior Court Presiding Judge Janis L. Sammartino addresses a group of judges from Russia who visited the courthouse Tuesday and observed proceedings in various courtrooms.

TOM KURTZ / For the Daily Journal



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Svetlana P. Serova, left, a judge visiting from Russia, listens to Russian language court interpreter Oleksandra Johnson translate for her.

to juveniles, drug users and spousal abusers that emphasize therapy instead of solely punishment.

He also said the Russian judges

also were impressed with the availability of the justice system to all citizens, a point also made by Serova.

She said she would remember "the respect that the ordinary citizens have for the judges and the justice system of America."

For decades, citizens of the Soviet Union distrusted the legal system, and, after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, reorganization and reforms began, Serova said.

Traditionally low pay for judges slowly increased, bringing more young males to the bench. But even today, 60 percent of Russian judges are women, who took jobs men didn't want because "our judicial positions are hard work and they aren't well-paid," she said.

Being a judge creates a familiar challenge for Serova, a former corporate lawyer who is married to a lawyer and is the mother of two children. She has faced the ques-

tion of how a career and a family can be compatible, just as American women in the legal profession have.

"It's possible to successfully combine both," she said. "Having a good family is in fact beneficial, or a prerequisite, to having a successful career. It is exactly then that a person is in balance."

Serova has considered a career change that could be even more demanding but rejected it for the time.

"I had an offer to run for a deputy position in the Duma, but I think I'm not at the right age yet, and I haven't achieved the

right point in life," she said.

But when she gets back to St. Petersburg, she's going to lobby the Duma for legislative action on Russia's juvenile justice system. "Definitely," she said.

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Russian judge