

Harold Brouillette

Judge Uses His Legal Knowledge To Empower Reentering Offenders

By Lia Gormsen

Before an inmate can pass through the exit doors of Avoyelles and J. Levy Dabadie correctional centers in Louisiana, he is subject to a “shot” from Judge Harold J. Brouillette. The retired judge teaches classes at each center as part of the facilities’ mandatory prerelease programs. The classes — which Brouillette summarizes as a “sort of shot in the arm” — are attended by all of the 20 to 30 inmates who are set to be released within the following weeks. The shot is painless; the medicine, however, is potent. Side effects can include a smooth reentry process and an eased family reunification.

Brouillette has been a volunteer at Avoyelles and Dabadie for about six years, teaching family law and substance abuse classes each month and counseling offenders one-on-one after each class. At 77, Brouillette also volunteers at a short-term residential substance abuse treatment center. There he takes on the dual role of pupil and teacher, offering his family law class to the center’s residents in return for lessons from counselors at the center. It’s a nice trade-off — Brouillette learns the basics about substance abuse and its connection to crime, which he incorporates into his substance abuse class. Although not an expert on the topic, Brouillette does offer his class a degree of empathy and a litany of suggestions on how to deal with dependency issues once inmates are discharged. “I can well understand somebody who enjoyed having a few drinks before they went into prison really looking forward to a drink when they get out,” he said.

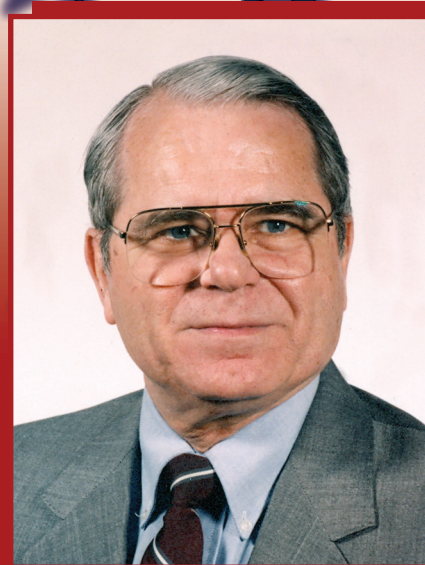
In the family law class, the information Brouillette supplies is culled from 50 plus years of experience as an Army trial judge advocate officer; a defense attorney; and a trial judge in criminal, family and juvenile courts. The issues Brouillette touches on in the class are personal and have the

potential to affect inmates’ quality of life upon release. He tells offenders about their rights under Louisiana’s custody and visitation laws. He provides details on child support payments, what will be expected of them as parolees and how to avoid a repeat appearance at the correctional facility. In his interactions with inmates, Brouillette has come across “a very common misapprehension about the role of parole officers” — that inmates think officers exist to catch them doing something wrong. It is this sort of lack of knowledge that Brouillette tries to offset in his class. While a judge in Louisiana’s 12th Judicial District, Brouillette became familiar with the dynamics of the parole officer/parolee relationship. He also became intimately aware of the types of behavior that will land parolees back in prison — which he passes on to inmates in the hopes that they will avoid it.

Another misconception Brouillette encounters in his class concerns child visitation laws, which he contends are “very liberal because judges want children to know their fathers.” He informs offenders of their legal rights and describes how they can go about seeking visitation. Brouillette avoids telling inmates that they should see their children — but, if offenders decide to seek visitation, he is there to help. He leaves religion and morals out of his discussions with inmates and makes it a point never to preach. After all, Brouillette joked, “there are chaplains to do that.”

Recently, Brouillette has become interested in visitation of another kind. He has taken to studying the practice of family and friend visitation at correctional facilities — reading up on the latest research and even conducting his own study of sorts at Avoyelles. Teaching the family law class got Brouillette thinking critically about the role that visitation plays in maintaining family bonds

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during incarceration, and how the presence, or absence, of these visits correlate to successful family reunification upon release. So, Brouillette went through the motions himself, attending some of the Saturday and Sunday visitation sessions at Avoyelles and subjecting himself to the same interrogation and search procedures that all visitors experience. Of note was the necessary invasiveness of the initial background check and the searches. With the warden’s consent, Brouillette interviewed several inmates and their visitors. These discussions reaffirmed his views about the importance of visitation, which he relays to offenders during after-class counseling sessions.

Brouillette sees his service as a way to give back to a field that has given him a satisfying life’s career. Although he will tell you that his classes play “only a minor part” in the prerelease programs, administrators at Avoyelles consider Brouillette’s role as teacher and mentor a vital part of the reentry process for all inmates.

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