Judge told remarks were sexist

Reprimand:
Now retired, he won’t serve in any other judicial capacity.

By MARK HAYWARD

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A recently retired Superior Court judge has been reprimanded after reportedly making sexist remarks, such as blaming the increased number of female lawyers for the public’s disrespect of the legal system.

The New Hampshire Judicial Conduct Committee said John M. Lewis, who quietly retired last summer as superiors started investigating complaints, was responsible for making remarks that could be interpreted as showing gender bias.

But while Lewis said he may have made the remarks, he said they were off

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the-cuff musings that were misinterpreted.

“I was clearly misunderstood. I take responsibility for this; I’m a judge, I should be clear,” Lewis said Monday. Lewis said he’s not a sexist. He said his wife is an artist and a feminist; his daughter is a lawyer. His mother, an escapee from Nazi Germany, ran the family business after his father died at a young age, he said. And at Columbia Law School, he worked alongside then-professor Ruth Bader Ginsburg on a Supreme Court legal brief challenging sexual discrimination.

Lewis, a nominee of former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen, is the former chairman of the state Board of Education and had been a judge for more than 12 years.

He is 67 and retired as supervisory judge of Strafford County Superior Court, where he earned $137,800 a year.

According to the sevenpage reprimand, Lewis made the questionable statements when meeting with Strafford County public defenders last July. (See more on report at UnionLeader.com)

The reprimand paraphrased the public defenders. Each said Lewis told them that the legal profession risks losing the respect of society because so many women are becoming lawyers.

He compared that to Russia, where he said no one respects the medical profession because it is dominated by females. He said people respect the business world because it is male-dominated. And he said the teaching profession is harmed because women are becoming lawyers rather than teachers.

Also, when meeting with Strafford County prosecutors, Lewis said aggressive prosecution of child abuse cases may hurt families and society, the reprimand said. Lewis told the New Hampshire Union Leader that the remarks dealt with a specific, difficult case.

According to the reprimand, Lewis told prosecutors he would apply procedures differently to defense lawyers than he would to prosecutors. Lewis reportedly said he would give a higher level of scrutiny to cases involving child abuse.

Strafford County Attorney Thomas Velardi said the statements were out of character for Lewis, and he never saw evidence of Lewis acting on them from the bench.

“I never felt as though Judge Lewis made a ruling against us because of these thoughts, or beliefs, or musings,” Velardi said. Velardi said Lewis had started questioning victims who attended the bail hearings of their alleged abusers, and the questioning had damaged the victims’ psyches.

Under the terms of the reprimand agreed to by Lewis, he retired without senior status, meaning he won’t take judicial work on a limited basis. Nor will he serve in any other judicial capacity.

Lewis agreed that he created an appearance of impropriety by making statements that could be reasonably interpreted to show gender bias and prejudice.

But Lewis disputed any other violations of the judicial code.

Lewis said he retired given his age and the difficulty of fighting such allegations.

He said he continues to practice law in a limited capacity.

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