



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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Valentine's Day at W.Va. Courthouses

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Photos: <https://wvcourts.smugmug.com/Hidden-Galleries/n-fgSnLK/AkersCourtroomWedding/>

CHARLESTON, W.Va. – “Going to the Courthouse” doesn’t have quite the same ring as “Going to the Chapel,” but Valentine’s Day is a busy day for weddings in West Virginia courts.

Thirteenth Judicial Circuit (Kanawha County) Judge Maryclaire Akers is one of many West Virginia circuit and family court judges opening their courtrooms for weddings on Monday.

Judge Akers’ decision to invite couples to the courthouse is an homage to the late Circuit Judge Charles E. King, Jr., who was known as the “King of Hearts” for his Valentine’s Day weddings. Judge Akers was appointed in March 2021 to fill Judge King’s seat after his death.

“We thought it was a good way to honor his memory and his service. We thought it would lighten things up. It’s been pretty serious the last couple of years,” Judge Akers said.

She had nine weddings scheduled for Monday. Her staff set up a donated trellis with flowers in her courtroom and her bailiff, Jeremy Burns, was ready to take photographs with cell phones. He has some experience at that. He and his wife operate Burns Exposures Photography, which was named the 2021 Best Wedding Portrait Photographer by the Best of West Virginia Weddings Magazine.

On another floor in the Kanawha County Judicial Building, Eleventh Family Court Circuit (Kanawha County) Judge Brittany Ranson Stonestreet presided over the wedding of her secretary-clerk, Ashton Canter, and her fiancé.

Other courts are also expected to be busy officiating weddings on Monday. Fifth Family Court Circuit (Jackson, Mason, and Wirt Counties) Judge Bryan Cromley had three weddings scheduled and was open for walk-ins.

Twenty-Third Judicial Circuit (Berkeley, Jefferson, and Morgan Counties) Judge David M. Hammer also had three weddings scheduled and had time set for walk-ins. In the four years he has been a judge, he has officiated almost 300 nuptials. The most he ever did in one day was six.

“I did one emergency wedding. Turns out the man had a heart attack in progress and needed to be married so he could have health insurance,” Judge Hammer said.

In Mineral County, Circuit Judge James W. Courier, Jr., who averages about 45 weddings a year, also had three scheduled for Monday. “If someone shows up at the courthouse and wants to get married, I do the wedding if I am in the office and not in one of my other counties,” he said. His Twenty-First Judicial Circuit also includes Grant and Tucker Counties.

First Family Court Circuit (Brooke, Hancock, and Ohio Counties) Judge Joyce D. Chernenko is used to couples showing up unannounced. One Christmas Eve, a couple went to the Brooke County Courthouse to get their license and thought they would have immediate access to a judge to get married.

“The bride was dressed in a flowing white dress and everything. The county clerk told them that they could not get married by a judge unless they had made arrangements already with a judge’s office and that, since it was 10 a.m. on Christmas Eve, the clerk doubted the couple could get ahold of a judge,” Judge Chernenko said.

“My husband happened to be doing a title search that morning and heard all of this discussion,” she said. He called her – she was grocery shopping – and she said she would be happy to marry them as soon as she was able to go home and change clothes. The wedding was that afternoon on the town square in Wellsburg with the municipal Christmas tree in the background.

Twenty-Fourth Family Court Circuit (Berkeley and Jefferson Counties) Judge Sally G. Jackson had one wedding scheduled Monday in Berkeley County, along with several divorces. Eleventh Family Court Circuit (Kanawha County) Judge Jim Douglas just had divorces scheduled all day.

Seventeenth Judicial Circuit (Monongalia County) Judge Phillip D. Gaujot, Eighteenth Family Court Circuit (Doddridge and Harrison Counties) Judge Lori B. Jackson, and Twenty-Third Judicial Circuit (Morgan, Berkeley, and Jefferson Counties) Judge Debra McLaughlin each had one wedding scheduled today.

“I am told by my assistant that February 22, 2022 (2-22-22), is a much more popular date for weddings this year,” Judge McLaughlin said.

Eleventh Judicial Circuit (Greenbrier and Pocahontas Counties) Judge Jennifer P. Dent and Twenty-Fourth Family Court Circuit Judge Richard D. Stephens (Berkeley and Jefferson Counties) also have weddings scheduled for February 22.

Judge Akers has five weddings scheduled for February 22. One couple has a special request. “I have to make sure I pronounce them husband and wife at exactly 2:22 p.m.,” she said.

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