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## Judge Reprimanded for Eleven Violations of Conduct

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A small-town Texas judge was reprimanded by the State Commission on Judicial Conduct for continuing to serve on a bank's board of directors after taking the bench, mishandling criminal defense attorney appointments and telling a local Kiwanis Club meeting that some people "need to be killed."

Those were just some of the ways in which Eric Clifford ran afoul of the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct, according to his public reprimand which was released by the commission on Sept. 15. The reprimand lists 11 incidents in which Clifford violated the code's canons.

Clifford is one of the original founding shareholders of Lamar National Bank and has served as one of the bank's directors since it was created in 1981. He became judge of the Sixth District Court in Lamar County in 2009, but continued to serve as one of the Paris bank's directors where his family owns 28 percent of the bank worth more than \$10 million, according to the reprimand.

During his appearance before the commission, Clifford testified that he was aware the code prohibited his service on the bank's board of directors but that he continued to serve after taking the bench in order to look after his family's "substantial investment," according to the reprimand.

The reprimand concluded that Clifford made improper public and ex parte statements about cases pending before him that raised legitimate concerns about his impartiality.

One of them involved a 2014 murder case in which a woman was indicted for allegedly killing her husband. Prior to the indictment, Clifford attended a local Kiwanis Club meeting in which he expressed his opinions about the case by making disparaging remarks about the victim by saying some people "need to be killed." Clifford later voluntarily recused himself from the case.

And the reprimand also concluded that Clifford failed to comply with the Texas Fair Defense Act, which regulates the appointment of attorneys to indigent defendants. Although Lamar County has a random-wheel system for appointing qualified defense attorneys to felony

cases, the reprimand concluded Clifford appointed a disproportionate amount of cases to a single attorney, paying him \$82,062 over the course of a year.

Clifford told the commission the reason he appointed the attorney to so many cases was he felt he was the most qualified and experienced attorney and believed those cases would have less chance of coming back to him on appeal. Clifford even appointed the same attorney to represent his auto mechanic—who used to live in the judge's airplane hangar—when he was arrested for possession of cocaine while riding Clifford's scooter, according to the reprimand.

"Finally, the commission concludes that Judge Clifford's initial lack of candor during the commission's investigation into these allegations proved to be an aggravating factor in reaching a final decision," according to the reprimand.

Clifford did not return two calls for comment.

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