



United States Courts for the Ninth Circuit

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NEWS RELEASE

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Chief Judge Emeritus Sidney R. Thomas Receives Honorary Doctorate from Montana State University

Chief Judge Emeritus Sidney R. Thomas, of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, was awarded an honorary doctorate in humane letters by his alma mater, Montana State University on May 13. Judge Thomas served as chief judge of the court from 2014 to 2021.

The ceremony, held during commencement, took place in the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse. “For serving with distinction as chief judge of the nation’s largest federal appellate circuit court for your leadership in updating technology to improve operations to make the judicial process more accessible to the people of the United States, and for your sustained body of work that has established you as one of the most influential, productive and independent judges on the bench,” said MSU President Waded Cruzado during the presentation.

“This institution and the Montana University System are deeply woven into the fabric of my family” said Judge Thomas. Among the advice he gave to graduates was to commit to excellence. “Volunteer for the most difficult tasks. If you are stuck with a bad job, do it well, your commitment to excellence will pay enormous dividends over your life,” he said. A video of his [acceptance speech](#) is available on YouTube starting at 46:30.

Judge Thomas, confirmed by the Senate on Jan. 2, 1996, is a native of Bozeman, Montana. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Montana State University in 1975 and his Juris Doctor from the University of Montana School of Law, graduating with honors in 1978. Prior to coming onto the federal bench, he had been in private practice in Billings from 1978 to 1995. He also was an adjunct instructor of law at Rocky Mountain College in Billings from 1982 to 1995.

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Page 2 of 2

Judge Thomas finished his seven-year term as chief judge with myriad accomplishments to his credit, starting with his contributions as a member of the Judicial Conference of the United States (JCUS) and as chair of the Judicial Council for the Ninth Circuit. He led an effort to reduce office space use, saving the federal government over \$10 million per year, and he encouraged the Fairness Committee in its valuable work to bring diversity to chambers by hiring people of color as law clerks and other in-chamber staff.

Perhaps Judge Thomas' single biggest challenge was overseeing the rapid transition of the Ninth Circuit from business as usual to adhering to the requirements of lockdown due to COVID-19. A longtime proponent of technology, Judge Thomas managed a workforce that had many staff fulfilling their duties from home, but many coming into courthouses to ensure the wheels of justice continued to turn.

Judge Thomas noted that it has been “a great honor and a privilege to serve as an active judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals for 26 years.” To date, Judge Thomas has heard over 11,550 appeals and authored 406 precedential opinions. He will continue to hear appeals as a circuit judge in senior status.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit is the nation's largest federal appellate court with 29 authorized judgeships. It includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington state, and the territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

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