

# NEWS RELEASE

Arizona Court of Appeals, Division Two

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## **Babies on the Bench**

TUCSON – In the halls of justice, the sounds of gurgling and cooing now float through the corridors.

Little Nickolas, Olivia and Zoey – all born within 10 days of each other in January – spend workdays with their parents, staff at the Arizona Court of Appeals, 400 W. Congress St.

These three 4-month-olds represent the inaugural class of a state program, adopted by the court, that allows parents to bring their babies to work for the first six months of their lives.

The parents, staff and judges all deem the program – perhaps the first of its kind for a court – a huge success. Even initial skeptics have been won over. Having babies on board reduces the stress level not just of their parents, but of all employees.

“Having babies around does something to people’s blood pressure – it comes way down,” said Chief Staff Attorney Beth Beckmann, a 29-year veteran of the court. “We know the babies and they know us and we all feel invested in them. The bonding the program has created among all of us has been extraordinary.”

Zoey, who suffers from an atrial ventricular canal defect, was recently hospitalized for complications related to that condition. Her mother, Kaitlin Hollywood, credits the program with permitting her to more quickly notice Zoey’s worsening symptoms than if she had been with different caregivers during the day than in the evening.

The parents say the program has allowed them to be more efficient at work, where they are not distracted by worries about childcare quality. Olivia’s mother, Crystal Brown-Ward, used to

routinely check the babycam videos when her first child was in daycare. Now, she has Olivia by her side, worries cast aside.

On the rare occasions when one of the parents has tasks that take them away from their child, a designated staff member steps in as a surrogate caregiver. If one of the babies gets a little fussy, they are immediately taken to a designated sitting room, where the parent can care for the child and continue to work without disturbing anyone.

Two of the parents, Brown-Ward and Hollywood, are attorneys who work as law clerks for Vice Chief Judge Garye Vasquez. In July 2017, they simultaneously informed him they were expecting babies in January. They worried about the challenges Judge Vasquez's chambers might face with both of his law clerks out on maternity leave at the same time. In addition, Nickolas' mother, Dennice Martinez, part of the court's team of specialized deputy clerks, notified Clerk of the Court Jeff Handler that she too was expecting a baby in the same month.

The prospect of having three valuable employees on leave for an extended period of time sparked some creative out-of-the-box thinking. The Governor's Office now allows infants to remain in the workplace under its "Happy Babies" program, which recently was expanded to include seven state agencies. So, the court carefully examined the state's guidelines and requirements before adopting its program.

The Court of Appeals relies heavily on the legal research and writing skills of its law clerks, said Chief Judge Peter Eckerstrom, noting that the clerks typically are recent top-level law school graduates highly sought after in the private and public sectors. The court resolves 800 cases a year, with law clerks providing indispensable assistance in drafting decisions and opinions.

"As recent law school graduates, our law clerks not only find themselves at a crucial stage of their young legal career, but they simultaneously find themselves at the age when they and their spouses would logically choose to have children," Eckerstrom observed. "We believe the program has not only enhanced the productivity of our clerks, it has also situated us to recruit and retain talented employees in a context where talent matters."

Judge Vasquez, who together with Beckmann and Hollywood researched and adapted the program for the appellate court, said any initial misgivings before the program's start have completely evaporated, which he credited to the professionalism and dedication of the law clerks and staff. Vasquez emphasized that enhancing court operations was the primary goal of the program.

“Bottom line, if we didn't believe that the program would improve the productivity of our court, we wouldn't do it,” Vasquez said. “And, we don't pretend it's a program that would function well in every workplace environment.”

Vasquez also noted an unexpected benefit of the program: improved energy and morale caused by the calming effect little Nickolas, Olivia and Zoey have on the entire workplace.

“People will come to see the babies just because they need that baby fix,” he said. “In drafting our opinions and decisions, the judges and supporting attorneys engage in a collaborative process where egos must be set aside. It is pretty hard to be grouchy after you've passed an adorable baby in the hallway.”

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Zoey Hollywood, daughter of Kaitlin Hollywood, Nickolas Martinez, son of Dennice Martinez, and Olivia Ward, daughter of Crystal Brown-Ward



Court of Appeals Chief Judge Peter Eckerstrom cradles baby Olivia while Vice Chief Judge Garye Vasquez gets quality time with baby Zoey.



Court of Appeals Judge Garye Vasquez passes the gavel to baby Olivia and her mom, Crystal Brown-Ward.