

Al Brancher (right) works in Judge Tom Keith's courtroom Friday.

Brancher to retire after 11 years as bailiff

Lana F. Flowers
The Morning News

BENTON COUNTY

After 11 years of calling out defendants' names and keeping order in the court, Bailiff Al Brancher is calling it quits June 30.

Brancher has served as Circuit Judge Tom Keith's bailiff, but being a bailiff was a second career. Brancher also worked 23 years for the Chicago Police Department, then came to Northwest Arkansas after retiring from that job.

"I retired in '84 and met the judge in '85. We bowled together and he said he needed a bailiff, so I took the job," Brancher said. "I thought it was a little part-time job, but needless to say, it got busier."

Now, Brancher said, it's a good time for him to retire because Keith wants a full-time bailiff and Brancher doesn't want to work full-time.

"I'll be 66 in September. I figure I've worked long enough," Brancher said.

Besides, he has grandchildren to visit and plans to knock down in the local lanes. Brancher said he and his wife of 46 years, Marie, have three children and six grandchildren.

"I have kids who live in Chicago and in the suburbs. My second son, Robert, is 42 and is a Chicago policeman who took my badge number when I retired," Brancher said.

He says he worries about Robert because crime in Chicago has gotten more violent.

"Crime has gotten a lot worse since I was there and people have no respect for the police," Brancher said.

He said the worst incident he remembers from his Chicago career is an automobile accident in which six teen-agers died.

"It was on Outer Drive near the lake. They were joy riding and lost

control of the car," Brancher said. "It's pretty traumatic to see six teen-agers just laying there."

As for his time as bailiff in circuit court, Brancher has stood near the judge's bench and heard evidence against rapists, murderers and thieves. But he said the one thing that stands out in his mind is the outcome of the Dustin Denton murder trial.

A jury found Denton innocent in the November 1993 shooting death of Joseph Wade Dozier. Dozier, 19, was shot five times after he and Denton argued about Misty Dawn Pearson. Both Dozier and Denton dated Pearson in the months before the shooting.

Denton claimed the shooting was in self-defense and that Dozier was breaking into a Siloam Springs apartment where Denton and Pearson were babysitting.

Brancher said he remembers Denton's not-guilty verdict very clearly because he was shocked.

"That really blew my mind. I stood in the courtroom and heard the evidence. But oh well, that's what juries are for," Brancher said.

He said he will also remember playing "musical courtrooms," because there used to be only four courtrooms for five Benton County judges.

"We were always wondering if we were going to hold court in the lobby or which one of the courtrooms would be available," Brancher said.

The county has remedied that problem with construction of additional courtrooms, so each judge has a place to hold court without worrying about scheduling conflicts.

But after he retires, Brancher won't have to go to the courthouse

every day and he said he'll miss hearing what's going on.

"I'll miss going to work because it's interesting. You hear all these stories every day. And working with Tom (Judge Keith) has been an experience," Brancher said.

Keith said he hates to see Brancher leave.

"I hate to lose Al. He's been a part of our family now for 11 years and he's been my only bailiff since I have been circuit judge," Keith said.

"Al has a unique ability to maintain order while making the parties in a case and the jurors at ease. He worked well with the juries, he worked well with the attorneys and litigants and, when necessary, was able to take absolute command of the situation," Keith said. "The county has been served well. Al has worked for less than what he was worth."

Keith's case coordinator, Terri Womack, said she will miss Al and his wife's homemade cinnamon rolls, which often came to work with Al.

"Al's been our bailiff for as long as I can remember. I can't imagine court without him," Womack said.

Gina Keller, who was Keith's court-orders clerk until she recently took a job with juvenile probation, said she'll miss Brancher's sense of humor.

AH: Marsha Woodruff