

'Friend of the friendless' has a problem with court system

By Randall Beach

Attorney Norm Pattis is so outraged by what he sees in Connecticut courtrooms that he's calling on citizens to go in there, get involved and "find a better way to do justice."

Pattis' new book, "Taking Back the Courts: What We Can Do to Reclaim Our Sovereignty," is an angry appraisal of our "failing" court system.

"I believe the courts belong to the people but that judges, prosecutors and defense lawyers are taking the courts away," Pattis writes in the opening chapter.

"Do you care enough to demand change?" he asks the reader.

His hair tied back in a ponytail, Pattis is a combative figure as he strides into New Haven Superior Court and other legal venues.

"I am a warrior and I am bold enough to assert here that I fight as well as any lawyer alive," he writes in the preface to his book. "I am inspired by the thought that we are all equal and that no person is the sum of his worst moments."

"I am the last friend of the friendless, a warrior for the despised, a thorn in the side of the popular and powerful," he writes.

When I interviewed Pattis at his small office in downtown New Haven, he admitted he's not sure if

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his book will "accomplish anything" but he said he enjoys writing and wanted to "create a stir." He has written a column for the Connecticut Law Tribune for the past decade.

His book is also personally revealing. He states that his father ran a crew of armed robbers in Detroit, got into a dispute with somebody there in 1954 and shot the man. It's unclear if the victim survived.

Pattis' father fled town with his girlfriend, who shortly afterward became Norm Pattis' mother.

"My dad disappeared from my life when I was about 8," Pattis told me.

"No wonder I have issues with authority!" he said with a grin.

Pattis said the first change he'd like to see in the courts is eliminating mandatory minimum sentences. "It's far too easy for lawmakers to sit in the safety of the capital and say, 'This should be five years, this should be four.' I'm half-serious about this: if a person wants to be a lawmaker, they should serve 3-6 months in prison and see what the product is they're selling."

Pattis also advocates raising the pay for jurors (now \$50 per day in Superior Court). "You get upper or middle class and retired people serving. It's skewed. I've sat next to many men of color who ask, 'Where are my peers?'"

In addition, Pattis thinks convicted felons should be allowed on juries as soon as they have served their time.

Pattis is particularly angry about court policy toward people accused of possessing child pornography. In his book he writes, "In the dozens of sex offense cases I've handled, I've yet to see any causal link between looking at pictures and molesting actual children."

Continued on Next Page

New Haven Register

Continued from Previous Page

“We live in a sexophrenic culture,” he told me. “We use images of cheap and easy sexuality to sell everything, to energize us. ... And the minute someone colors outside the line, the law is savage with them.”

Pattis knows he isn't making any friends in the courthouses with his attacks on judges for “intellectual cowardice,” prosecutors who he says are given too much power, and “unaccountable” police officers.

Most judges probably aren't happy about Pattis' advice to the public that they refuse to stand when a judge enters the courtroom. (Pattis says he does stand because he doesn't want to hurt his client's chances.) He thinks judges should not be treated as “nobility.”

Pattis even refuses to say “your honor” when addressing a judge. He simply uses “judge.”

Pattis is also critical of “how we mock the presumption of innocence” and too quickly “fall in love with the victim.”

“No other country incarcerates as many people as we do,” he noted. “We call ourselves ‘the land of the free’ but we've got the world's largest penal colony. How did that happen?” ■