

**BEFORE THE BOARD OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT
OF THE SUPREME COURT OF OHIO**

In re:

Complaint against

Case No. 2024-024

**Hon. Leslie Ann Celebrezze
Attorney Reg. No. 0071679**

**Findings of Fact,
Conclusions of Law, and
Recommendation of the
Board of Professional Conduct**

Respondent

Disciplinary Counsel

Relator

OVERVIEW

{¶1} This matter was heard on March 18, 2025, before a panel consisting of Margeret M. Murray, Esq., Kurt A. Kaufman, Esq. and Hon. Rocky A. Coss, panel chair. None of the panel members resides in the district from which the complaint arose or served as a member of the probable cause panel that reviewed the complaint pursuant to Gov. Bar R. V, Section 11.

{¶2} Respondent was present at the hearing and represented Monica A. Sansalone. Joseph M. Caliguri and Jay R. Wampler appeared on behalf of Relator.

{¶3} This case involves allegations of misconduct by Respondent while serving as Judge of the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division.

{¶4} Based upon the parties' stipulations presented at the hearing, the panel finds, by clear and convincing evidence, that Respondent engaged in professional misconduct, as outlined below. Upon consideration of the applicable aggravating and mitigating factors, and case precedents, the panel recommends that Respondent be suspended from the practice of law for a period of two years with one year stayed upon the condition that Respondent commit no further misconduct and pay the costs of these proceedings.

Due to a possible federal investigation regarding the allegations involved, Respondent indicated on the record that on the advice of her counsel representing her regarding the investigation, she was invoking her 5th Amendment right not to incriminate herself and would not answer questions beyond those related to establishing that she had agreed to the stipulations of fact in the record. The panel did not consider that for any purpose but notes it for the purpose of explaining why no testimony from Respondent was elicited during the hearing.

FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

{¶5} Respondent was admitted to the practice of law in Ohio on November 8, 1999, and is subject to the Rules of Professional Conduct, the Code of Judicial Conduct and the Supreme Court Rules for the Government of the Bar of Ohio and the Government of the Judiciary of Ohio.

{¶6} At all times herein, Respondent served the court with four other judges: Colleen Reali (“Judge Reali”), Tonya Jones (“Judge Jones”), Diane Palos (“Judge Palos”), and Francine Goldberg (“Judge Goldberg”).

{¶7} Mark Dottore (“Dottore”) is the President and CEO of Dottore Companies, LLC, and serves as a court-appointed receiver and mediator. (Ex. 82.) At all times herein, Dottore, who is not an attorney, and his company were represented by counsel.

{¶8} Respondent and Dottore have known each other since childhood. (Ex. 67.) Dottore served as Respondent’s campaign treasurer in her 2008 judicial campaign. *Id.* Joint Exhibit 88 accurately reflects Respondent’s (xxx-xxx-7820) and Dottore’s (xxx-xxx-9403) respective cell phone numbers.

Count One

The Jardine Matter

{¶9} On December 29, 2020, Jason Jardine (“Jason”) filed for divorce from his wife, Crystal Jardine (“Crystal”). *Jardine v. Jardine*, Cuyahoga C.P., No. DR-20-383667. (Ex. 1.)

The case was randomly assigned to Judge Tonya Jones. *Id.*

{¶10} Joseph Stafford (“Stafford”) represented Jason. Richard Rabb (“Rabb”) represented Crystal.¹ *Id.*

{¶11} The Jardines owned and operated several funeral homes and cremation centers in Northeast Ohio.

{¶12} On February 3, 2021, Nicholas Froning (“Froning”), in his capacity as special ethics counsel for Crystal, filed a *Motion to Disqualify Joseph G. Stafford*, the attorney representing Jason alleging that Crystal had consulted with, and paid a fee, to Stafford. (Ex. 1; Ex. 2.) The court set the matter for a hearing on August 25, 2021; however, it was later continued and never held. (Ex. 1.)

{¶13} On March 19, 2021, Crystal filed a *Motion to Appoint Receiver*. (Ex. 1; Ex. 3.) If called to testify, Judge Jones would state that she approached Respondent before appointing Dottore and asked whether he would be an appropriate choice for a receiver in the *Jardine* case. Respondent advised Jones that Dottore would be an appropriate choice.

{¶14} On July 14, 2021, Judge Jones appointed Dottore as the receiver in the *Jardine* divorce. (Ex. 1; Ex. 6.) The order pertained to five of the Jardines’ business entities and was limited

¹ Froning entered an appearance for Crystal on February 2, 2021, for the limited purpose of seeking Stafford’s disqualification due to an alleged conflict of interest. (Ex. 1.)

to marshaling the assets, identifying the stakeholders, conducting an accounting, and determining if the entities were managed prudently. (Ex. 6.)

{¶15} At all relevant times, Dottore has been, and is, represented by Tim L. Collins and Elizabeth E. Collins of Thrasher, Dinsmore & Dolan relative to the *Jardine* divorce.

{¶16} On July 16, 2021, Jason appealed the appointment of a receiver to the Eighth District Court of Appeals. (Ex. 8.) For the next year, both parties filed dozens of motions and conducted discovery in their highly contentious divorce action. (Ex. 1.)

{¶17} On May 26, 2022, the Eighth District Court of Appeals affirmed the appointment of Dottore as receiver. *Jardine v. Jardine*, 2022-Ohio-1754 (8th Dist.). (Ex. 9.) The same day, Dottore filed a *Motion to Revise Appointment Order*, in which he sought to expand the scope of his duties. (Ex. 1; Ex. 10.) On June 7, 2022, Dottore, through counsel, filed an *Emergency Amended Motion to Revise Appointment Order*, seeking to expand the scope of his duties. (Ex. 1; Ex. 11.)

{¶18} On or around August 9, 2022, before ruling on the aforementioned motions, Judge Jones voluntarily recused herself from the *Jardine* divorce due to an alleged conflict of interest relating to Jones' staff attorney having joined the Stafford law firm as an associate. (Ex. 1; Ex. 13.). Under Sup.R. 36.019(A) and Cuyahoga C.P. Dom. Rel. Div-Loc.R. 2(B)(2), upon recusal by a judge, the administrative judge must randomly assign the case. (Ex. 83; Ex. 84.)

{¶19} If called to testify, Judge Jones would state that upon recusal, she sent the case to Respondent for random reassignment. Judge Jones would further state that upon receiving the case, Respondent and Judge Jones spoke, and Respondent asked her to issue an order assigning the case directly to Respondent.

{¶20} Three days later, on August 12, 2022, Judge Jones issued a *Judgment Entry Nunc Pro Tunc of Recusal*, in which Jones reasserted her recusal and assigned the *Jardine* case directly to Respondent. (Ex. 1; Ex. 14.)

{¶21} On August 29, 2022, Dottore, through counsel, filed a *Supplemental Brief in Support of Motion to Amend Appointment Order*. (Ex. 1; Ex. 15.) The following day, August 30, 2022, Respondent granted Dottore's motion and issued an amended order modifying (*i.e.*, expanding) the receivership. (Ex. 1; Ex. 16.)

{¶22} On September 2, 2022, Jason filed a *Motion to Reconsider August 30, 2022, Amended Order Modifying Receivership*. (Ex. 1; Ex. 18.) Dottore, through counsel, opposed the *Motion to Reconsider*. (Ex. 1; Ex. 19.) On September 20, 2022, understanding the time for objections had expired pursuant to the position taken by Dottore's attorneys, Respondent approved payment of Dottore's and his legal counsel's fees for the period of July 14, 2021, through August 25, 2022.² (Ex. 1; Ex. 20.) On February 16, 2023, Respondent approved payment of Dottore's and his legal counsel's fees for the period of January 1, 2023, through January 31, 2023. (Ex. 1; Ex. 21.)

{¶23} In or around March 2023, Jason hired a private investigator to conduct video surveillance on Respondent and Dottore. (Ex. 85; Ex. 86A-86F.) Between March 14, 2023, and March 31, 2023, the private investigator recorded Respondent and Dottore as described in the following paragraphs.

² Stafford's position is that he timely filed objections regarding Dottore's and his attorneys' fees. *See* ¶ 54.

1. On Tuesday, March 14, 2023, in the early afternoon, Respondent drove her vehicle to Dottore's company in downtown Cleveland, entered the building, and remained inside for 31 minutes. (Ex. 85.)
2. On Wednesday, March 15, 2023, at approximately 5:00 p.m., Respondent entered the Capital Grill in Lyndhurst, OH. A few minutes later, Dottore entered the Capital Grill and sat with Respondent at a table. *Id.*
3. Respondent and Dottore were joined by Rabb (Crystal's attorney). The three socialized over drinks. (Ex. 85; Ex. 86G.)
4. Dottore left the Capital Grill at 5:49 p.m. Respondent and Rabb remained at the Capital Grill until they departed in their respective vehicles at 6:38 p.m. *Id.*
5. On Thursday, March 16, 2023, at 4:19 p.m., Respondent arrived by car at Dottore's office, entered the building, and remained inside for 42 minutes. *Id.*
6. On Monday, March 20, 2023, Dottore, through counsel, filed a *Motion to Show Cause* against Jason alleging Jason's noncompliance with the appointment orders. (Ex. 1; Ex. 23.)
7. On Tuesday, March 21, 2023, at 12:15 p.m., Respondent entered Dottore's office, where she remained for 19 minutes. (Ex. 85.)
8. On Wednesday, March 22, 2023, Jason filed a *Motion to Show Cause* against Dottore. (Ex. 1; Ex. 24.)
9. That afternoon, Wednesday, March 22, 2023, at 4:32 p.m., Respondent arrived at Delmonico's Steakhouse in Independence, OH. Upon arrival, Dottore's car was parked in the restaurant's parking lot. (Ex. 85.)

10. Respondent and Dottore remained inside Delmonico's Steakhouse for two hours and 26 minutes. *Id.*
11. Upon leaving the restaurant, Dottore leaned toward Respondent, and they kissed each other on the lips. (Ex. 86D; Ex. 86H.)
12. On Friday, March 24, 2023, at 1:36 p.m., Respondent left her home and drove to Dottore's home on Richmond Road in Lyndhurst. Dottore's car was parked in his garage, and the garage door was open. (Ex. 85.)
13. Respondent entered through the garage and moments later the garage door closed. Respondent remained at Dottore's home for two hours and 26 minutes. (Ex. 85; Ex. 86E.)
14. On that same day, March 24, 2023, understanding the time for objections had expired pursuant to the position taken by Dottore's attorneys, Respondent approved payment of Dottore's and his legal counsel's fees for the period of February 1, 2023, through February 28, 2023. (Ex. 1; Ex. 25.)³ Respondent's entry was file-stamped on April 3, 2023.
15. On Friday, March 31, 2023, Respondent left her home at 9:46 a.m. and drove to Dottore's home on Richmond Road in Lyndhurst. Respondent remained in Dottore's home for 61 minutes. (Ex. 85; Ex. 86F.)

{¶24} On May 18, 2023, Jason filed an *Affidavit of Disqualification* against Respondent. (Ex. 31.). Thereafter, Jason filed several *Supplemental Affidavits of Disqualification*. On July 22, 2023, Respondent submitted her response to the *Affidavit and Supplemental Affidavits of*

³ Stafford's position is that he timely filed objections regarding Dottore's and his attorneys' fees. *See* ¶ 54.

Disqualification. (Ex. 34.) On August 18, 2023, Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy disqualified Respondent from presiding over the *Jardine* matter. *In re Disqualification of Celebrezze*, 2023-Ohio-4383. (Ex. 35.)

{¶25} As of August 18, 2023, Respondent had authorized and/or approved \$241,935 in receiver fees to Dottore and \$171,859.31 to Dottore’s legal counsel in the *Jardine* case. (Ex. 87.) The matter of Dottore’s and his attorneys’ fees, along with the timeliness of the objections, were tried before Hon. Deborah Boros and is currently awaiting a decision. (Ex. 1.) Relator is not alleging impropriety regarding the Collins’ representation of Dottore, nor is Relator alleging impropriety in the amount of fees charged. If Tim Collins were called to testify, he would state that he was unaware of any alleged improper relationship between Dottore and Respondent.

{¶26} At no time did Respondent disclose on the record her interactions with Rabb or Dottore, as alleged above, to Jardine or his lawyers.

Rule Violations

{¶27} Based upon the stipulations of Relator and Respondent, the panel finds by clear and convincing evidence that Respondent’s conduct, as alleged in Count One, violates the following provisions of the Ohio Code of Judicial Conduct and the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct:

- **Jud.Cond.R. 1.2** [A judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary, and shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety];
- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.5** [A judge shall perform judicial and administrative duties competently and diligently and shall comply with guidelines set forth in the Rules of Superintendence for the Courts of Ohio];

- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.11(A)** [A judge shall disqualify himself or herself in any proceeding in which the judge’s impartiality might reasonably be questioned]; and
- **Prof.Cond.R. 8.4(d)** [A lawyer shall not engage in conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice].

Count Two

Maron and Abedrabbo Cases

The Maron Case

{¶28} On September 1, 2020, Ari Maron filed for divorce against his wife, Jessica Maron. *Maron v. Maron*, Cuyahoga C.P., No. DR-20-382494. (Ex. 36.) The case was randomly assigned to Judge Goldberg. *Id.* On December 2, 2021, Judge Goldberg recused herself, and the case was randomly assigned to Judge Colleen Reali. (Ex. 36; Ex. 37; Ex. 38.)

{¶29} Attorneys Jonathan Rich and Larry Zukerman represented Ari, while Stafford represented Jessica. (Ex. 36.)

{¶30} Judge Reali assigned the case to her magistrate, Jason Parker. In December 2022, Magistrate Parker became ill and began working a reduced schedule. The *Maron* case was very contentious with the parties filing dozens of motions. (Ex. 36.)

{¶31} In early January 2023, Respondent approached Magistrate Parker and advised him that she would take the *Maron* case to relieve the burden of presiding over the contentious case while he was ill. A few days later, Respondent approached Judge Reali and offered to take the *Maron* case to reduce Judge Reali’s caseload, given her magistrate’s situation.

{¶32} A few days later, Respondent approached Judge Reali and stated, “I’ve been getting some calls on the *Maron* case.” Respondent then offered to take the *Maron* case to reduce Judge

Realí's caseload, given her magistrate's situation. On or about January 18, 2023, Judge Realí recused herself from the *Maron* case. (Ex. 36; Ex. 40.)

{¶33} Under Sup.R. 36.019(A) and Cuyahoga C.P., Dom.Rel.Div., Loc.R. 2(B)(2), upon recusal by a judge, the administrative judge must randomly assign the case. (Ex. 83; Ex. 84.) Rather than having the case randomly assigned, Respondent directed the assignment commissioner to assign the *Maron* case to her. Respondent then signed an auto-generated entry that falsely stated the case had been randomly assigned to her via electronic judge roll.

To preclude any impropriety or the appearance of a conflict of interest on the part of the assigned Judge, **COLLEENIM ANN REALI** voluntarily removes herself from the above captioned case. This case is hereby reassigned to Judge **LESLIE ANN CELEBREZZE** (via electronic judge roll) to resolve all pending and future issues.

(Ex. 36; Ex. 40.)

Respondent set the case for trial on February 14, 2023. (Ex. 36.)

{¶34} After the trial commenced, the court took a recess for the parties to discuss settlement. During settlement discussions, Respondent asked the parties' lawyers to consider a mediator. When asked who she would recommend, Respondent recommended Dottore. Both parties objected to the appointment of Dottore. As a result, Respondent did not appoint Dottore.

{¶35} On April 17, 2023, Attorney Robert Glickman filed his notice of appearance on behalf of Ari Maron. (Ex. 36; Ex. 41.) On August 18, 2023,⁴ Respondent recused herself from the *Maron* case, and the case was randomly assigned to Judge Palos. (Ex. 36; Ex. 42.)

⁴ On the same day, Respondent was disqualified from presiding over the *Jardine* case. See ¶ 52.

The Abedrabbo Matter

{¶36} On February 25, 2021, Elizabeth Abedrabbo (“Elizabeth”) filed for divorce from her husband, Abdelrahman Abedrabbo (“Abdelrahman”). *Abedrabbo v. Abedrabbo*, Cuyahoga C.P., No. DR-21-384289. (Ex. 43.) The case was randomly assigned to Judge Goldberg; however, due to a conflict, the case was eventually randomly assigned to Judge Realı on or about March 4, 2021. *Id.*

{¶37} Stafford represented Elizabeth, and Scott Rosenthal and Robert Glickman (“Glickman”) represented Abdelrahman. *Id.* Rosenthal was sole counsel for Abdelrahman, entering a notice of appearance on September 22, 2021, until September 12, 2022, when Glickman entered a notice of appearance as additional counsel because Rosenthal was ill. Glickman represented Abdelrahman during four days of trial, then had no involvement in the case until he filed a *Writ of Mandamus* on November 10, 2022. *See* ¶ 84.

{¶38} On previous and various occasions Respondent has referred to Glickman as her lawyer. If called to testify, Glickman would confirm that, over the years, including sporadically in 2022 and 2023, he has provided legal advice and counsel to Respondent on employment and other matters in response to her specific legal questions; however, Respondent has never formally retained or compensated Glickman. (Ex. 90.) If called to testify, Judges Jones, Realı, and Goldberg would state that Respondent has referred to Glickman as her lawyer.

{¶39} On November 10, 2022, Glickman filed a *Writ of Mandamus* against Judge Realı seeking to compel Judge Realı to enter rulings on four motions that had been pending. *Abedrabbo v. Realı*, Supreme Court Case No. 2022-1386. (Ex. 60.) On November 29, 2022, Judge Realı filed a *Motion to Dismiss the Writ*. (Ex. 62.)

{¶40} On January 25, 2023, the Supreme Court of Ohio issued a decision granting an *Alternative Writ of Mandamus* ordering Judge Reali to comply with a briefing schedule for the presentation of the evidence in the *Abedrabbo* divorce case. (Ex. 64.) On the same day, Respondent contacted Glickman to discuss the *Writ* he filed against Judge Reali. In response, Glickman sent a copy of the *Alternative Writ* to Respondent via email. (Ex. 50.)

{¶41} On January 26, 2023, pursuant to the Supreme Court of Ohio’s entry, Judge Reali issued an entry requiring the parties’ attorneys to appear for an in-person conference on January 30, 2023, so Judge Reali could “advance the previously scheduled trial dates in the herein matter.” (Ex. 43; Ex. 51.) On that same day, Respondent called Judge Reali and asked Judge Reali to transfer the *Abedrabbo* case to Respondent, stating that since the Supreme Court was going to hear the *Writ*, Judge Reali would look bad if she stayed on the case.

{¶42} Judge Reali refused, stating to Respondent that judges do not just “give up” cases. Judge Reali explained that there was a recusal process and that the case would “go into the hopper” for random reassignment. Respondent then stated to Judge Reali words to the effect of, “A little birdie told me that the *Abedrabbo Writ* will be heard, and the *Writ* will go away if you give me the case.” Respondent then stated words to the effect of, “Dottore is close to the new Chief Justice. He has her ear. Kennedy loves Dottore.”⁵ When Judge Reali again refused, Respondent said, “We’ll talk later.”

{¶43} If called to testify, Judge Reali would state that she understood that Respondent was suggesting that if Judge Reali agreed to transfer the case to Respondent, Glickman would dismiss the *Writ* against Judge Reali.

⁵ Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy has no personal or professional relationship with Dottore.

{¶44} The following day, January 27, 2023, while Respondent and Judge Realì were in Respondent’s chambers, Respondent again stated that Judge Realì should give the *Abedrabbo* case to Respondent. When Judge Realì stated that it was not proper, Respondent replied, “I still think you should give it to me anyway.”

{¶45} On January 30, 2023, Judge Realì held the status conference with the attorneys; however, Glickman was not present. Judge Realì scheduled the trial in *Abedrabbo* for Monday, February 6, 2023.

{¶46} On January 27, 2023, Lawrence Acton, an associate in Glickman’s firm, filed a public records request with the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division, asking for all of Judge Realì’s cases in which Stafford was attorney of record. On January 30, 2023, Mr. Acton sent a follow up email to the Court regarding the public records request.

{¶47} On January 30, 2023, Judge Goldberg had a meeting in her chambers with Judge Realì and Judge Jones. Judge Goldberg called Respondent on speakerphone to discuss the public records request. During the conference call, Respondent stated words to the effect of, “It’s escalating. They’re going to read all our emails.” Respondent stated that she did not want Judge Realì to review or check for accuracy the response to the public records requests as it could constitute tampering.

{¶47} On January 31, 2023, Respondent directed court staff to provide Acton with the information responsive to the public records request without input from Judge Realì. On February 1, 2023, Rosenthal filed a *Motion to Continue* the February 6, 2023, trial. (Ex. 43; Ex. 53.)

{¶48} On February 2, 2023, the Domestic Relations judges held their monthly meeting; however, Judge Palos was not in attendance due to a pre-planned vacation. During the meeting,

Respondent told Judge Realì in the presence of Judge Goldberg and Judge Jones that Judge Realì must continue the *Abedrabbo* case.

{¶49} The other judges asked Respondent why Judge Realì had to continue the case. Respondent falsely claimed that Glickman had filed a *Motion to Continue* in the *Abedrabbo* case on the “administrative docket.” While there is an administrative docket covering all of the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, which includes the Domestic Relations Division, there is not a specific Domestic Relations administrative docket. None of the judges had heard of the “administrative docket,” and Judge Realì asked to see the motion.

{¶50} Respondent replied that if Judge Realì did not continue the case, Respondent would continue it. Judge Realì replied with words to the effect of, “Go ahead, but you don’t have the authority to continue my case.” Judge Realì ended the conversation by saying, “I am not continuing the case, and I am not getting off.”

{¶51} Contrary to Respondent’s assertions, there was no “administrative docket” in the Cuyahoga County Domestic Relations Court and Glickman had never filed a *Motion to Continue* in the *Abedrabbo* case. If called to testify, Judge Palos would state that after the meeting, Judge Realì called Judge Palos, who was on vacation, and asked Judge Palos if there was an administrative or secret docket. Judge Palos, who has been employed as a magistrate or judge at the Cuyahoga County Domestic Relations Court for 39 years, told Judge Realì that there was no administrative or secret docket.

{¶52} On February 3, 2023, Glickman filed a *Motion to Withdraw as Counsel* for Abdelrahman. (Ex. 43; Ex. 54.) On that same day, Judge Realì granted Glickman’s *Motion to Withdraw*. (Ex. 43; Ex. 55.)

{¶53} On the morning of trial, February 6, 2023, Rosenthal appeared, and Judge Reali denied his *Motion for Continuance*. On February 6, 2023, Glickman filed an *Affidavit of Disqualification* against Judge Reali in the Supreme Court of Ohio. (Ex. 65.) On February 17, 2023, Glickman sent a copy of the *Supplemental Affidavit* to his *Affidavit of Disqualification* that he filed against Judge Reali to Respondent at her personal email address: zonfa.leslie@gmail.com. The attachment was entitled, “Supplemental Affidavit—Final Redline.” (Ex. 56.)

{¶54} If called to testify, Glickman would state that he sent the *Supplemental Affidavit* after Respondent contacted him and requested a copy. Respondent told Glickman that she had requested a copy from Reali, but that Reali had refused her request. If called to testify, Judge Reali would state that Respondent never asked her for a copy of the *Affidavit of Disqualification* or the *Supplemental Affidavit of Disqualification*.

{¶55} On March 15, 2023, Judge Reali recused herself from the *Abedrabbo* case, and the case was randomly assigned to Judge Palos. (Ex. 43; Ex. 57.) After the *Abedrabbo* case was assigned to Judge Palos, Respondent approached Judge Palos’ bailiff and stated that Judge Palos could transfer the *Abedrabbo* case to Respondent. (Ex. 59.) Judge Palos declined to transfer the case to Respondent. *Id.*

Rule Violations

{¶56} Based upon the stipulations of Relator and Respondent, the panel finds by clear and convincing evidence that Respondent’s conduct, as alleged in Count Two, violates the following provisions of the Ohio Code of Judicial Conduct and the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct:

- **Jud.Cond.R. 1.2** [A judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary, and shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety];

- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.5** [A judge shall perform judicial and administrative duties competently and diligently and shall comply with guidelines set forth in the Rules of Superintendence for the Courts of Ohio];
- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.9 (A)** [A judge shall not initiate, receive, permit, or consider ex parte communications];
- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.11(A)** [A judge shall disqualify himself or herself in any proceeding in which the judge’s impartiality might reasonably be questioned];
- **Prof.Cond.R. 8.4(c)** [A lawyer shall not engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation]; and,
- **Prof.Cond.R. 8.4(d)** [A lawyer shall not engage in conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice].

Count Three

False Statement During the Disciplinary Process

{¶57} Jason Jardine filed a grievance against Respondent, alleging bias resulting from her relationships with Dottore, Rabb, and Glickman. (Ex. 71.) In response to the allegations, Respondent stated, through her attorney, that she and Dottore are “close personal” friends and have known each other since Respondent was seven years old; however, through her attorney, she denied a romantic relationship and stated, again through her attorney, relative to the kiss outside Delmonico’s Steakhouse, that she and Dottore both “are Italian and have a habit of kissing all family and close friends.” (Ex. 67.)

{¶58} During times relevant to this complaint, Respondent had consulted with Stafford and Rosenthal, each once, about getting a divorce from her husband. Dottore was not the source

of Respondent's marital problems for which Respondent consulted counsel, and there was never a sexual relationship between Respondent and Dottore.

{¶59} However, as a result of Respondent's marital problems, and due to her long-standing personal relationship with Dottore, Respondent developed a deeper emotional attachment to, and feelings for, Dottore. As alleged in the *Second Amended Complaint*, Respondent told Judge Reali and Judge Goldberg in separate conversations that she was in love with Dottore. If called to testify, Judge Reali and Judge Goldberg would confirm that in or around January 2023, Respondent told them she was in love with Dottore and had consulted with counsel about getting a divorce from her husband.

{¶60} Respondent misrepresented to Relator the true extent of her emotional attachment to Dottore in her grievance responses.

Rule Violations

{¶61} Based upon the stipulations of Relator and Respondent, the panel finds by clear and convincing evidence that Respondent's conduct, as alleged in Count Three, violates Prof. Cond.R. 8.1(a) [In connection with a disciplinary matter, a lawyer shall not knowingly make a false statement of material fact].

Count Four

The Rennell Case

{¶62} On October 28, 2019, Andrew Rennell filed for divorce against his wife, Susan Rennell. *Rennell v. Rennell*, Cuyahoga C.P. No. DR-19-37900. (Ex. 74.) The case was randomly assigned to Judge Jones. *Id.* Initially, Jennifer Singleton and Deanna DiPetta of the Myers Roman law firm represented Andrew and Jim Lane of the Rosenthal Thurman Lane law firm represented Susan. (Ex. 70; Ex. 74.)

{¶63} In December 2020, Judge Jones’s magistrate, Sharon Echols, scheduled the case for trial in March 2022; however, the trial date was canceled and rescheduled for July 2022. *Id.*

Due to an issue that arose between DiPetta and Magistrate Echols in May 2022, Judge Jones and Magistrate Echols recused themselves from the case. (Ex. 70; Ex. 74; Ex. 75.)

{¶64} Judge Jones advised Respondent in her capacity as the Administrative Judge of the recusal and that the case had been set for trial. (Ex. 70.) Respondent advised Judge Jones that she could accommodate the trial dates; consequently, Judge Jones sent the case to Respondent.

{¶65} Under Sup.R. 36.019(A) and Cuyahoga C.P., Dom.Rel.Div., Loc.R. 2(B)(2), upon recusal by a judge, the administrative judge must randomly assign the case. (Ex. 83; Ex. 84.) In her May 18, 2022, entry, Judge Jones stated, “It is therefore ordered, adjudged, and decreed that this matter will be transferred to the Administrative Judge” and “that this matter will remain scheduled for Trial.” (Ex. 75.) On or about May 18, 2022, rather than having the case randomly assigned, Respondent manually assigned the *Rennell* case to her own docket. (Ex. 70.)

{¶66} On July 12, 2022, Lane filed a motion to appoint Dottore as a receiver to effectuate the sale of the marital business. (Ex. 74; Ex. 77.) On July 13, 2022, Respondent granted Lane’s motion and appointed Dottore as receiver in the *Rennell* case. (Ex. 74; Ex. 79.)

{¶67} The *Rennell* case proceeded to trial as scheduled on July 11, 12, and 13, 2022.

{¶68} On July 19, 2022, Respondent approved Mary Whitmer’s motion on behalf of Dottore seeking to have her appointed as receiver’s counsel. (Ex. 74; Ex. 80.)

{¶69} In August 2022, Andrew filed for bankruptcy, which stayed the divorce case. The bankruptcy was dismissed in September 2023. (Ex. 74.)

{¶70} On August 18, 2023, Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy disqualified Respondent from presiding over the *Jardine* case for circumventing the Rules of Superintendence and the Local

Rules and manually reassigning the Jardine case to her own docket. *In re Disqualification of Celebrezze*, 2023-Ohio-4383. (Ex. 35.)

Rule Violations

{¶71} Relator and Respondent stipulate that Respondent's conduct, as alleged in Count Four, violates the following provisions of the Ohio Code of Judicial Conduct and the Ohio Rules of Professional Conduct:

- **Jud.Cond.R. 1.2** [A judge shall act at all times in a manner that promotes public confidence in the independence, integrity, and impartiality of the judiciary, and shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety];
- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.5** [A judge shall perform judicial and administrative duties competently and diligently and shall comply with guidelines set forth in the Rules of Superintendence for the Courts of Ohio];
- **Jud.Cond.R. 2.11(A)** [A judge shall disqualify himself or herself in any proceeding in which the judge's impartiality might reasonably be questioned]; and
- **Prof.Cond.R. 8.4(d)** [A lawyer shall not engage in conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice].

AGGRAVATION, MITIGATION, AND SANCTION

{¶72} When recommending sanctions for attorney misconduct, the panel must consider all relevant factors, including the ethical duties violated by Respondent, precedent established by the Supreme Court, and the existence of aggravating and mitigating factors. Gov. Bar R. V, Section 13(A). The parties stipulated to the existence of three aggravating factors and two mitigating factors.

Aggravating Factors

{¶73} Pattern of misconduct. The parties stipulated that Respondent engaged in a pattern of misconduct. The misconduct involved four separate cases over a period of approximately two years. In each of the cases, Respondent failed to disclose her relationships with Dottore, Rabb and Glickman to any of the parties or attorneys in the cases.

{¶74} Multiple offenses. The parties stipulated that Respondent committed multiple offenses. There were fifteen separate violations involved in four separate counts.

{¶75} Submission of false statements during the investigation. The parties stipulated that Respondent made false statements during the disciplinary investigation regarding her relationship with Dottore which was clearly more than a “close personal” friendship as she initially described it. While the parties stipulated that there was no sexual relationship between Dottore and Respondent, the stipulated facts and exhibits certainly lead an objective person to conclude that there was a significant emotional and very possibly a romantic relationship between them.

Respondent had consulted with two attorneys regarding a possible divorce. She told two fellow judges that she was in love with Dottore. She drove to his house, parked her car in his garage, closed the garage door, and spent nearly two and a half hours in his home during the afternoon.

The other evidence that suggests that Respondent has a romantic interest in Dottore is the extent of their telephone calls. There was an extremely large number of calls between them which one would expect from a couple that was romantically involved, not just childhood friends.

All of this evidence would lead any party, or their attorney involved in a case pending before a judge who had a deeply emotional relationship with a receiver in the case, to question whether the judge was fair and impartial with regard to issues involving that receiver. Whether the two had an actual sexual relationship, romantic relationship, or deeply emotional relationship does

not matter. It is the effect of the appearance of that relationship to the parties and the public that undermines the confidence in the decision making of the judge.

{¶76} Dishonest or selfish motive. In addition to the first three aggravating factors, based upon the stipulations and the exhibits, the panel further finds that Respondent acted with a dishonest or selfish motive. The relationship between Respondent and Dottore was the key issue in the *Jardine* case that led to the filing of Count One and Respondent's admission of violations alleged therein.

The false statements submitted by Respondent during the disciplinary proceeding were made with a dishonest or selfish motive, specifically with intent to mislead the investigation into the Jardine grievance regarding her relationship with Dottore. She claimed they were close friends when in fact, it is clear that she has deep, emotional, and based upon the evidence, likely romantic feelings for him as indicated by her statements to two of her colleagues that she was in love with Dottore. Her efforts to mischaracterize her relationship with Dottore were designed to avoid an investigation and disciplinary filing based upon the nature of that relationship, the extent of which would likely have gone undetected but for the hiring of a private investigator by Mr. Jardine.

Mitigating Factors

{¶77} No prior discipline. Respondent has had no prior disciplinary violations.

{¶78} Evidence of good character or reputation. Respondent submitted several letters attesting to her good character or reputation.

{¶79} A cooperative attitude towards the proceedings. Respondent entered into 158 written stipulations and stipulated admission of 90 joint exhibits and stipulated to all fifteen rule violations alleged in the four counts of the certified complaint.

Sanction

{¶80} Judges are to be held to the highest standards of professional behavior because they are invested with the public trust. *Disciplinary Counsel v. O'Neill*, 2004-Ohio-4704, ¶57, *Disciplinary Counsel v. Carr*, 2022-Ohio-3633, ¶86. “The primary purpose of judicial discipline is to protect the public, guarantee the evenhanded administration of justice, and maintain and enhance the public confidence in the integrity of the judiciary,” *Disciplinary Counsel v. O'Neill*, supra, ¶33. Sanctions may also serve to deter other judges and attorneys from engaging in similar conduct, *Disciplinary Counsel v. Horton*, 2019-Ohio-4139, ¶60, citing *In re Judicial Campaign against Brigner*, 89 Ohio St.3d 1460, 732 N.E.2d 994 (2000), citing *In re Judicial Campaign against Morris*, 81 Ohio Misc.2d 64, 675 N.E.2d 580 (1997).

{¶81} The misconduct of Respondent clearly failed to meet that high standard. She manipulated the assignment of the *Jardine*, *Maron*, and *Rennell* cases to herself after the original judges assigned to those cases recused and attempted to have the *Abredabbo* case assigned to her by Judge Reali. In her response to the letter of inquiry regarding the *Rennell* grievance, respondent’s attorney wrote: “In May of 2022, Judge Celebrezze reassigned the *Rennell* case to her own docket, believing in good faith that she had the authority to do so as the AJ. Judge Celebrezze did not realize at that time that it was improper as this was before the decision rendered by the Supreme Court of Ohio in the *Jardine* case. Recall, the *Jardine* decision was not issued until August 18, 2023—more than year later. Additionally, such reassignments had been the routine practice of the prior AJ.” (Jt. Ex. 70, p. 2).

On page three of her post-hearing brief, Respondent states: “There was no stipulation of fact and no evidence that Judge Celebrezze *knew* she could not assign cases to herself in her capacity as administrative judge....” On page five of the brief, Respondent states: “There is

evidence that as administrative judge she incorrectly believed she could assign cases to herself to assist fellow judges.”

{¶82} Respondent’s claim of ignorance on that issue indicates either a gross ignorance of or an intentional disregard for the well-established rules regarding random assignment of cases in multi-judge courts following a recusal by one of its judges. Sup.R. 36.019(A) provides that “[f]ollowing the recusal of a judge in a multi-judge court or division, the administrative judge shall randomly assign the case among the remaining judges of the court or division who are able to hear the case.” Loc.R. 2(B)(2) of the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division, provides that “[w]hen it is necessary for a case already assigned to a judge to be reassigned due to a recusal, the Administrative Judge will reassign a judge, at random, and record the reassignment on the docket.”

{¶83} The language in both rules is unequivocal and plain. If a judge of a multi-judge court recuses from a case, the case must be reassigned to a new judge randomly. There is no language within those rules that allows the practice that Respondent alleges that she and prior administrative judges have followed. Further, Respondent signed the entry assigning the *Maron* case to her stating it had been assigned randomly which was false. If Respondent honestly believed the rules allowed her to assign it to herself as administrative judge, then it would seem logical that she would have prepared an entry stating that rather than signing an entry that contains a false statement of fact.

{¶84} There is simply no excuse for any administrative judge not to know and to follow the rules regarding random reassignment of a case when a fellow judge recuses from a case. It is obvious to anyone who reads the rules. It should not have taken a ruling by the Chief Justice of the

Supreme Court of Ohio in the *Jardine* case stating what the rule clearly states for Respondent to have been aware of and to have followed those rules.

{¶85} Judge Jones originally recused from the *Jardine* case and returned it to the assignment office for random reassignment. Respondent then requested that Judge Jones assign the case directly to her, which she did. There is no evidence this was done to help Judge Jones. In the *Abedrabbo* case, Respondent attempted to have Judge Palos transfer the case to her after it had been randomly assigned. Prior to that, she had attempted to bully Judge Reali into assigning the case to her and made another false statement that a motion to continue the trial had been filed on a non-existent administrative docket which Respondent was going to grant. Judge Reali even advised Respondent that it was improper to transfer the case.

{¶86} In the *Jardine* case, Respondent failed to disclose her relationships with Dottore, the court appointed receiver and Rabb, the attorney representing the plaintiff to the defendant and his counsel. Respondent's false statements to the Relator during the investigation were obviously an attempt to conceal her relationship with Dottore and hopefully avoid disciplinary proceedings.

{¶87} Respondent failed to disclose her relationship with attorney Glickman in the *Abedrabbo* case. Glickman, who was representing the defendant, had provided Respondent with legal advice in the past and respondent referred to him as her attorney. The evidence also demonstrates that Respondent was communicating with Glickman regarding the writ of mandamus that he filed against Judge Reali.

{¶88} Despite the decision by Chief Justice Kennedy, Respondent continued to preside over the *Rennell* case until their divorce was finalized on August 15, 2024, after all appeals were exhausted and a bankruptcy stay lifted. (Ex. 70; Ex. 74.) Neither Dottore nor his lawyer, Whitmer, submitted a request for fees, nor has Respondent awarded any fees to Dottore or Whitmer in the

Rennell case. At no time did Respondent disclose on the record the nature of her relationship with Dottore to any of the parties or their lawyers.

{¶89} Respondent argues that there was no actual harm caused by her misconduct. The panel disagrees. Because of his suspicions about Respondent's relationship with Dottore, Mr. Jardine was forced to hire a private investigator to uncover the extent of the relationship between respondent and Dottore which undoubtedly increased his legal fees and expenses. The disqualification of Respondent in the case caused delay which would have been avoided had Respondent acknowledged the relationship. This delay was detrimental to both parties who had an interest in concluding their divorce case. Respondent admitted to a violation of Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(d) with regard to three of the counts by engaging in conduct that is *prejudicial* to the administration of justice. Prejudice is commonly defined as harmful in various published dictionaries. Clearly, harm was caused to Jardine and the administration of justice in all cases.

{¶90} In the case of *Disciplinary Counsel v. Dann*, 2012-Ohio-5337, the Supreme Court stated at ¶22: "For example, we have declared, 'It is of utmost importance that the public have confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary.' *Disciplinary Counsel v. Allen*, 79 Ohio St.3d 494, 495, 1997-Ohio-136, 684 N.E.2d 31 (1997). And we have recognized that misconduct committed by a judge vested with the public's trust causes incalculable harm to the public perception of the legal system. *Disciplinary Counsel v. Hoskins*, 119 Ohio St. 3d 17, 891 N.E.2d 324, ¶81."

The misconduct of Respondent undermines the confidence of the public in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary and is harmful to the judicial branch of government in this state. The public does not expect nor should it, that judges can make false statements in judgment entries, to disciplinary authorities and their judicial colleagues, and receive nothing more than a reprimand

or stayed suspension. An actual suspension is necessary to deter other judges from committing similar misconduct and to make it clear to the public that this type of judicial conduct will not be tolerated.

{¶91} This case poses a challenge in determining the extent of the suspension sanction to be recommended. There appears to be no prior judicial cases involving all of the stipulated rule violations in this case. There are a total of fifteen separate violations including three violations of Jud.Cond.R. 1.2, 2.5, 2.11(A) and Prof.Cond.R. 8.4(d). There are also violations of Jud.Cond.R. 2.9, Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(c), and Prof.Cond.R 8.1.

{¶92} Each of the parties cited numerous cases in their post-hearing briefs. Relator cited the case of *Disciplinary Counsel v. Campbell*, 2010-Ohio-3265, *Disciplinary Counsel v. Burge*, 2019-Ohio-3205, and *Disciplinary Counsel v. Oldfield*, 2014-Ohio-2963. Her position is based on the sanctions imposed in those cases and her misconduct in this case, that a public reprimand is warranted.

{¶93} None of those cases involved a judge who made false statements during the disciplinary case, made false statements to judicial colleagues. Campbell received a one-year suspension with six months stayed. However, his conduct did not include any false statements or misrepresentations to disciplinary counsel or to judicial colleagues. He did not attempt to manipulate the assignment of cases to himself as did Respondent.

{¶94} Burge also received a one-year suspension with six months stayed. He was convicted of misdemeanor crimes regarding filing false financial disclosures and did not disclose his relationship with counsel appearing before him who were leasing office space from him in a building that he owned. However, he did not make any false statements to disciplinary counsel

during its investigation and resigned from the bench after his criminal convictions thus making future judicial misconduct unlikely. Here, Respondent remains on the bench.

{¶95} Oldfield received a public reprimand for three violations that occurred over the course of eleven days. Judge Oldfield was a passenger in the car with an assistant public defender driving home from a social engagement. The attorney was arrested for operating a motor vehicle while under the influence. Oldfield was a possible witness in the case. She allowed the attorney to stay in her home and drove her to the courthouse for a few days after the arrest until her driving privileges were restored.

Oldfield received a public reprimand as the sanction. Unlike Respondent, Judge Oldfield disclosed her relationship with the public defender to the municipal prosecutor and the public defender and obtained their consent to preside over fifty-three cases over eleven days. Oldfield did not make any false statements to disciplinary counsel, to fellow judges or to anyone else regarding the relationship.

{¶96} The Relator recommends a sanction of one year with six months suspended. The syllabus of *Disciplinary Counsel v. Fowerbaugh*, 1995-Ohio-261 held: “When an attorney engages in a course of conduct that violates DR 1-102(A)(4), the attorney will be actually suspended from the practice of law for an appropriate period of time.” That rule is now codified as Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(c) which Respondent stipulated to violating in Count Two of the certified complaint. Since then, the Supreme Court has held that an actual suspension is the presumptive sanction and can be tempered to a lesser sanction if the misconduct involves an isolated incident of dishonesty, or there is an abundance of mitigating evidence. *Mahoning County Bar Assn. v. Macala*, 2024-Ohio-3158.

{¶97} The Relator has cited several cases in support of the imposition of an actual suspension including *Disciplinary Counsel v. Burge, supra*, and *Disciplinary Counsel v. O’Neill*,

supra. As previously noted in this report, Burge received a one-year suspension with six months stayed. O'Neill received a two-year suspension with one year stayed. While Burge did involve criminal convictions, there was no violation of either Prof. Cond.R. 8.1 or 8.4(c).

{¶98} The panel has also reviewed other cases not cited by either party that are relevant to the determination of the sanction recommendation. In *Disciplinary Counsel v. Medley*, 2004-Ohio-6402, a suspension of eighteen months with six stayed was imposed on a municipal judge who committed several violations including Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(c). One of his acts of misconduct included signing a judgment entry falsely stating that a judgment debtor had personally appeared in open court and orally requested relief from a default judgment when in actuality, the judge had spoken with the debtor in person outside of court.

{¶99} In *Disciplinary Counsel v. Hale*, 2014-Ohio-5053, the respondent violated both Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(c) and 8.4(d). He dismissed a traffic ticket for his personal lawyer by filing a false judgment entry. He also testified falsely at the disciplinary hearing. He resigned from the bench prior to the disciplinary hearing.

{¶100} In *Ohio State Bar Assn. v. Jacob*, 2017-Ohio-2733, the respondent was convicted of misdemeanors involving soliciting prostitution and falsification of a judgment entry in a criminal case. His misconduct included violations of Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(c) and 8.4(d). He also resigned from the bench. He received a two-year suspension with one year stayed.

{¶101} In *Disciplinary Counsel v. Meyer*, 2012-Ohio-5487, the respondent made false and misleading statements in her response to relator's letter of inquiry in violation of Prof. Cond. R. 8.1(a). She also violated Prof. Cond. R. 8.4(c) and 8.4(h). The Court found that because of those violations, an actual suspension was necessary, and she received an eighteen-month suspension with six months stayed.

{¶102} The panel finds that the cases cited by Respondent do not support a public reprimand as a sanction. None of them involved a violation of Prof. Cond. Rule 8.1(a). None of them involved making false statements to judicial colleagues or the manipulation of assignment of cases to themselves. The panel further determines that the conduct of Respondent is more serious than that of the judges in those cases and warrants an actual suspension from the practice of law.

{¶103} Based upon the case law, the panel further finds that the suspension recommended by the Relator is not sufficient given the extent and nature of the misconduct by Respondent. As previously noted in this report, judges are held to a higher standard of conduct. Respondent failed to meet that standard by her conduct in manipulating assignment of cases, signing a journal entry with a false statement, lying to her judicial colleagues about the filing of a motion to continue on a non-existent administrative docket in the Domestic Relations Court, and her false statements to Relator during the investigation. Based upon the foregoing, the panel recommends that Respondent be suspended from the practice of law for two years with one year stayed upon the condition that she commit no further misconduct and pays the costs of this proceeding.

BOARD RECOMMENDATION

Pursuant to Gov. Bar R. V, Section 12, the Board of Professional Conduct considered this matter on August 1, 2025. The Board voted to adopt the findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation of the hearing panel and recommends that Respondent, Leslie Ann Celebrezze, be suspended from the practice of law in Ohio for two years, with one year stayed on the condition of no further misconduct. The Board further recommends that Respondent be ordered to pay the costs of these proceedings.

Pursuant to the order of the Board of Professional Conduct, I hereby certify the forgoing findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation as that of the Board.



D. Allan Asbury, Interim Director