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THIRTY YEARS AGO on my second day on the job, Chief Judge Richard Chambers of the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals taught me the human side of practicing law. The crisis was small in the context of the powerful court, but it was large in one elderly man's life.

I was reviewing briefs for the next set of oral arguments. Tucked among major labor, copyright and environment cases was a civil rights case. A neighbor had poisoned an elderly man's little dog. The neighbor was charged with a felony that could have put him in jail. However, the neighbor plea-bargained the felony down to a misdemeanor and instead paid a small fine. Utterly distraught at the death of his dog, the elderly man was never given a chance to be heard either on the plea or the sentence. He sued the local judge and the prosecutor in U.S. District Court for violating his civil rights. The court dismissed the case without a hearing, stating that the judge and prosecutor had immunity.

Judge Chambers had chosen to hear the case even though he agreed with the District Court's ruling. He explained that the man felt he had been wronged, and even worse, that no one would listen to him. The prosecutor bargained down the charge without consulting him, he didn't get a chance to speak at the sentencing, and the District Court wouldn't listen to him. But that next week, he would get to tell his story. It might not change the outcome but three U.S. Court of Appeals judges would listen to him. Thus, I learned the importance of the human stories behind the law.

The legal system can solve problems only if the parties believe they will be heard and their concerns fairly considered. A process that feels fair is just as important as a result that is technically correct. It is important the legal system **never forgets the human component inherent in justice.** That advice Judge Chambers gave me has stuck with me ever since.

Timothy Berg (tberg@fclaw.com) is an appellate litigator who has participated in more than 200 appeals before the United States Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of Arizona.