



# THE BUFFALO NEWS

## Battle for Cheektowaga town justice pits 2-term incumbent against career detective



*Cheektowaga Town Justice Paul S. Piotrowski, left, faces Cheektowaga Police Detective David M. Stevens in the race for town justice.*

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By **Jane Kwiatkowski Radlich** ([https://buffalonews.com/author/jane\\_kwiatkowski/](https://buffalonews.com/author/jane_kwiatkowski/))  
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Two-term incumbent Justice Paul S. Piotrowski is fighting for his political life in the race against Cheektowaga Police Detective David M. Stevens.

Piotrowski, who was jilted by town Democrat leaders for the endorsement, is endorsed by the Republican and Conservative parties. Piotrowski, 66, has chosen door-to-door campaigning rather than meet-the-candidates events.

Stevens, 55, is a newcomer to politics. A 28-year veteran of law enforcement, Stevens credits his career for giving him a diverse perspective. Stevens is backed by the Democratic, Working Families, Green and Independence parties.

The winner will join Justice James J. Speyer, former assistant police chief, at Cheektowaga Justice Court. Speyer spent 31 years as a law enforcer and replaced retired Judge Dennis T. Gorski, who left the bench in 2018 after serving four years.

Piotrowski is an attorney, but Speyer and Stevens are not. The state does not require town and village justices to have a law degree.

Sixty percent of the 1,832 town and village justices in New York State outside New York City are not attorneys, according to the New York State Magistrates Association.

The 1,300 locally funded courts have jurisdiction over such matters as vehicle and traffic cases, small claims, evictions, civil cases and misdemeanor criminal offenses.

There were 22,810 cases adjudicated by Cheektowaga's two justices in 2018, said Viktoriya Vorobyeva, Cheektowaga Town Justice Court clerk.

### **Piotrowski**

Piotrowski, a graduate of the University at Buffalo Law School, is seeking his third term. He noted a change in the attitudes of residents he encountered on the campaign trail.

"Voters are different this time. They developed strong feelings about issues they've watched on TV, and they are upset at the vision. So they vent," said Piotrowski. "I learned from experience that door-to-door campaigning was essential. Every time you knock on a door, it's a mystery — so you stand back and wait for a signal. Be sincere. Answer questions. It's an interesting experience when you connect."

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Piotrowski was a narcotics chief for the Erie County District Attorney's Office and a town and village prosecutor for 17 years. He also performed legal services pro bono to help people with mental illness, he said. (<https://buffalonews.com/>)



As a town justice, Piotrowski presided over Cheektowaga Drug Court for eight years. He said it presented some of the most challenging cases in his career as a jurist.

"Sentencing someone who is chemically dependent or deciding when someone should be sanctioned is the most difficult decision that has confronted me as a judge," said Piotrowski. "Rendering the appropriate sentence for those who suffer from addiction must be carefully thought out."

"I care deeply about the work I do, and I try to make a difference," Piotrowski said. "Perhaps I internalize too much of the human misery that I am confronted with each day. It can be frustrating when a judge is powerless to fix a particular problem."

## Stevens

Stevens, who is married and a father of five, is a graduate of Slippery Rock University. He joined the Cheektowaga Police Department in 1991 after starting his career as a correction officer in Ossining. He works as a detective in the Youth and Family Services Unit, where he serves on the Erie County Domestic Violence High Risk Team. Stevens was a D.A.R.E. instructor for more than 12 years and introduced the "Do the Right Thing" program to the town in 1996. He served on a subcommittee that worked to enact a state law in April 2017 that raised the age of criminal responsibility to 18.

"I was able to touch the lives of youth working in the Youth and Family Services Unit. Many of them are now grown with families of their own, and they still remember me. Working law enforcement in the community enlightened and inspired me. It made me appreciate everything I have," Stevens said.

Stevens said he has witnessed the effects of narcotics and alcohol addiction. When it comes to reducing addiction, Stevens sees the trend moving away from law enforcement toward a community approach.

"This entails the joint efforts of police, court, probation, drug court and the medical field. Having all these entities and more will hopefully allow us have better results," Stevens said.

The idea of running for public office did not take hold until 2015, after Gorski won the election for Cheektowaga justice, Stevens said.

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"I feel I am honest, sincere, compassionate with high integrity and work ethic," said Stevens. "I will bring fresh ideas to the court that will hopefully streamline the process." (https://buffalonews.com/)



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(https://buffalonews.com/author/jane\_kwiatkowski/) **Jane Kwiatkowski Radlich** – Jane Kwiatkowski Radlich is a staff reporter at The Buffalo News. A print journalism graduate of SUNY Buffalo State, she is also a licensed attorney.

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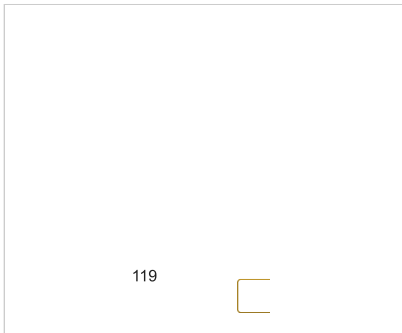
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