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Federal Judge Allows Independent Journalist's First Amendment Lawsuit Against Wisconsin Judge to Proceed

Self-represented journalist wins significant ruling in federal civil rights case challenging courtroom photography ban

MILWAUKEE, Wis. — An independent Wisconsin journalist representing himself against a sitting circuit court judge and a team of government attorneys won a significant legal victory Thursday when a federal judge rejected an attempt to dismiss his entire First Amendment civil rights lawsuit.

Kevin Mathewson, founder and editor of Kenosha County Eye, filed the lawsuit after Kenosha County Circuit Court Judge Chad Kerkman issued a September 2025 directive prohibiting him from entering and photographing proceedings in Kenosha County's intake courtroom. Mathewson alleges the restrictions were retaliation for his critical reporting about the judge.

Mathewson is an experienced courtroom journalist who has received media credentials more than 100 times in Kenosha County's intake court alone. He has also been credentialed to photograph proceedings in Kenosha, Racine, Milwaukee, Walworth, and Brown County Circuit Courts, as well as Kenosha Municipal Court and Pleasant Prairie Municipal Court. Mathewson has served as a pool photographer for nationally covered murder trials, including the Mark Jensen retrial and the Zachariah Anderson murder trial. According to his federal complaint, he has never been sanctioned, removed, or disciplined by a presiding judicial officer for his courtroom media work.

In a 21-page decision issued October 29, U.S. District Judge J.P. Stadtmueller, appointed by President Ronald Reagan in 1987, allowed Mathewson's claims for declaratory and injunctive relief to proceed.

Addressing Mathewson's argument that the courtroom restrictions remain ongoing, Stadtmueller wrote, "The Court agrees with Plaintiff."

"I drove to the federal courthouse in Milwaukee, paid the \$401 filing fee out of my own pocket, and filed this lawsuit with a dream that a federal judge would recognize that I am equal to Chad Kerkman under the law," Mathewson said. "I don't have a law degree, I don't wear a black robe, and I don't have taxpayers paying my legal bills. But I have the same constitutional rights as any judge."

"This case is bigger than me," Mathewson said. "It's about whether a judge can single out a journalist and prohibit him from photographing public court proceedings because he doesn't like the reporting. I believe the Constitution says no."

The lawsuit also names Racine County Circuit Court Judge Wynne Laufenberg and former Kenosha County Court Commissioner William Michel II.

Case: *Mathewson v. Kerkman, et al.*, No. 2:25-cv-01492-JPS, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Wisconsin.

MEDIA CONTACT: Kevin Mathewson | Kenosha County Eye
kevin@kenoshacountyeye.com | (262) 237-8501

ATTACHMENTS: Amended federal complaint; October 29 federal court order; photographs of Kevin Mathewson and Judge Chad Kerkman.

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