


JUDGE ROCHELLE CURLEY



Elected in 2006, this veteran of the State Attorney's office and a former trial attorney now holds court in the felony division of the 12th Judicial Circuit. Her father inspired her that "you have to give back."

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Google “Rochelle Curley” and you find info on her 2006 campaign for circuit judge, a very brief bio and a nice snapshot on the 12th Judicial Circuit website.

You’ll also find court instructions should you appear in her court, the fact that she’s on the board of the Boys and Girls Club of Sarasota, info on her career at the law firm of Shapiro, Goldman & Babboni and, lastly, that she was hit by a car (2008) while walking to court.

Since she won that election and has been in office now for over two years, the last item begs a follow-up—was she seriously injured? Unfortunately, Rochelle did sustain injuries, serious enough to keep her from the running which she likes to do to stay in shape and relieve stress. It was odd and some thought it even ironic or just real bad luck that someone would hit a judge on her way to court. But in December, 2008, she was struck on Ringling Blvd. at 9 a.m. by a driver who, according to police reports, “just didn’t see her.”

As Rochelle recalls it, she put her arm out instinctively to brace herself, but nonetheless her knee was hit by the car and she was thrown on to the car’s hood. She not only had injuries to her knee, arm, neck and back, but also cracked some teeth. Ever the civil servant, she recalls thinking, “Oh no, I have a trial to get to...”

Fast forward and we’re sitting in her office on the 10th floor of the Lynn N. Silvertooth Judicial Center on that same Ringling Blvd. Out her window is a view of the construction site of the city of Sarasota’s new jail. The judge, still in her robes, has entered her office and warmly apologizes for being only a tad late. Court work, she explains (as did her assistant) is hot and cold for some reason and at this moment it is very busy.

She jumps right into the topic of being a new judge. “You [new judges] typically start in family law,” she starts and pauses to comment on how attorneys on both sides have been so professional to her. “I can’t say enough nice things about them. They’ve been well prepared.” She should know, after all, as she was a trial attorney and a prosecutor and worked with many of them.

Manatee County was her first assignment and then she did family law in Sarasota and was then assigned to her current assignment, felonies. Sarasota is where she lives and it’s also where her children attend school. She has a boy in second grade and a daughter in fifth grade. Her husband, August Curley, is a banker. And speaking of kids and school, surely she must be a big draw on “show and tell” day at her children’s school. Yes, she concurs, especially when she dons her judicial robes, but she has stiff competition from her husband, a 6’ 4” former linebacker who

once played for the Detroit Lions.

So what exactly is felony as defined by Florida law? “Anything punishable by a year or more,” she explains. Anything less is considered a misdemeanor. What does she see in a “typical” day? “Drug cases, burglary cases, sexual batteries, suspended licenses....”

When asked why become a judge her father and her upbringing come to mind. “My father grew up in difficult circumstances. I’m the youngest of five. My mom was Japanese. I heard ‘you have to give back.’” A 20-plus military veteran, he also counseled her that, “you have to take baby steps”—be patient in other words. Her own career reflects adherence to his wisdom. Rochelle was born in North Carolina and her father’s military career took her family to Japan and New Mexico. When her father retired from the military, the family moved to Oklahoma.

While she once considered engineering or accounting, she opted to study law. She took her BBA in Business Administration in 1987 and worked a few years as an accountant and a city auditor in Tulsa.

In 1993 she graduated from the University of Oklahoma with her JD and began working as an Assistant State Attorney for the 12th Judicial Circuit in Sarasota, having met Earl Moreland, the State Attorney, at a job fair in Tampa. She prosecuted misdemeanor and felony cases, domestic violence and juvenile cases, and was promoted and transferred to Sarasota, gaining even more experience handling felony cases. It was perfect preparation for her future role as judge.

She left the State Attorney’s office in 2001 and began a three-year stint as a staff counsel doing civil litigation for Allstate. In 2004 she joined the law firm of Shapiro, Goldman & Babboni, a Sarasota firm with whom she handled personal injury cases.

Her election victory was over four other candidates—one of whom had been a judge. Peruse the list of judges in the 12th Judicial Circuit and you see a fair representation of women such as Judges Becky Titus, Donna Padar Berlin, Debra Johnes Riva and many more. But one detail is missing: first African American female judge in the 12th Judicial District. Her feelings about that? Yes she’s “Very proud,” but “it’s not like I walk around thinking about it. My kids get excited though when they see the courtroom.” To her it’s more like “I have an obligation to do the best job I can do.”

Accomplishment runs in her family. One sister is a dentist, one brother is a West Point grad while another brother is in the Peace Corps and another sister is a nurse.

Just a third of the way into her six-year term, it’s clear the career of Honorable Judge Rochelle Curley is one to watch. ♡

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