



JUDICIAL MERIT SELECTION COMMISSION
Sworn Statement to be included in Transcript of Public Hearings

Family Court
(Incumbent)

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1. Why do you want to serve another term as a Family Court judge?

Being elected to the Family Court Bench was a tremendous honor. It has always been my goal to find a career where I contribute something to society. I grew up in a blue collar family. My graduation from Wofford College was a huge achievement, and it was an unprecedented feat in my family. While I received encouragement along the way, my entire family was quite skeptical of my lofty goals. Nevertheless, I met many people along my journey who gave me guidance. Several college professors and deans led me along my academic journey. I interned with lawyers, and after joining the SC Bar, I met colleagues in the profession. Many of these attorneys helped my career advance. I was only able to reach this precipice by standing on the shoulders of all those who saw my potential. I give this context, because I now feel that it is my responsibility to return the favor.

As a Family Court Judge, I have the unique opportunity to use the law in a way that benefits our youth. I touch the lives of children who are struggling to understand their broken families. I protect those who have been neglected and abused. In juvenile delinquency proceedings, I have the duty of redirecting a young life away from criminal activity, and I try to inspire the dream of a better life. I deal with mental health and addiction issues daily. Of course, I recognize that I cannot solve every problem, but I am just grateful to have the opportunity to touch these young lives. I find it particularly rewarding that I have received feedback from some young people who have altered the course of their life in a favorable way due to their interaction with our Family Court System. This is why I want to continue to serve. I want to continue to face these challenges head on. I want to serve another term as Family Court judge, because I believe that I can make a difference.

2. Do you plan to serve your full term if re-elected?

Yes, I do plan to serve the entire term if re-elected.

3. Do you have any plans to return to private practice one day?

At my age, I am too young to eliminate possibilities, and of course no one knows what the future holds, but at this time, I have no plans to return to private practice. If given the opportunity, I would be honored to serve the Family Courts for many years to come.

4. Have you met the statutory requirements for this position regarding age, residence, and years of practice?

Yes.

5. What is your philosophy regarding *ex parte* communications? Are there circumstances under which you could envision *ex parte* communications being tolerated?

I am familiar with Judicial Canon 3(B)(7), which deals specifically with *ex parte* communication. I work to follow this Canon in handling such communications.

Improper *ex parte* communications are most frequently a problem with *pro se* litigants, as they don't understand the rules regarding communication. Recently, with so many hearings being conducted virtually due to COVID-19, I have experienced an increase in email traffic from *pro se* litigants. When I receive such communication, my assistant responds, adding all parties to the email, and advises the party against such communications. She explains that they are not allowed under the rules.

I do believe that certain *ex parte* communications are appropriate, as outlined in Canon 3(B)(7) or prescribed by law. For example, in Family Court, I regularly consider *ex parte* motions for emergency hearing, requests by SCDSS to place child into emergency protective custody, motions to proceed *in forma pauperis*, and requests to cease child support due to emancipation. All of these are appropriate under our laws, and all have set perimeters to ensure that all parties are given a chance to be heard in due course. Further, I frequently have to communicate with the Clerk, the County Managing Attorney for SCDSS, or the Juvenile Solicitor to assist in docketing matters. During these communications, we do not

discuss the facts of any cases, but merely scheduling issues as contemplated by the canon.

As for my philosophy on this issue; I believe it is crucial for a judge to avoid the appearance of impropriety, and towards that end, *ex parte* communication should be avoided where possible. As I have discussed here, there are times when it is necessary, and in those circumstances, the rules should be followed in that regard.

6. If you disclosed something that had the appearance of bias, but you believed it would not actually prejudice your impartiality, what deference would you give a party that requested your recusal? Would you grant such a motion?

I believe it is important to avoid even the appearance of impartiality, so yes, if I disclosed something that had the appearance of bias, I would be willing to recuse myself if any party feels that I should. As a general rule, I believe it is important to recuse myself, even when I feel I can be impartial, if one of the litigants feels I cannot. Having said, I do not believe litigants should be permitted to unnecessarily delay justice with unwarranted requests for recusal.

7. How do you handle the appearance of impropriety because of the financial or social involvement of your spouse or a close relative?

I have not personally faced this issue; however, if there was financial or social involvement by my spouse or other close relative that could result in the appearance of an impropriety, I would disclose that to the litigants, and hear their position before moving forward on the matter.

8. What standards have you set for yourself regarding the acceptance of gifts or social hospitality?

As a general rule, I do not accept gifts from lawyers that appear in front of me.

On a few occasions, attorneys have brought deserts or pastries for the court staff to share, usually around the holidays. Generally these are left with the security staff or clerks for anyone with the court to use. I have occasionally indulged in these treats. I believe this is an appropriate social norm, and is not a gift specifically for me.

I have exchanged gifts with a former law partner that does not appear in front of me, as we have maintained a close friendship. I have also occasionally exchanged small gifts with other members of the bench for holidays, birthdays, and other such occasions.

9. How would you handle a situation in which you became aware of misconduct or appearance of infirmity of a lawyer or of a fellow judge?

Unfortunately, I have encountered two situations where I have reported others to the SC Bar for investigation due to misconduct. It is rare, but I take my obligation to do so very seriously. In addition, I have once contacted Lawyers Helping Lawyers when it came to my attention that an attorney was struggling with depression and possible alcohol abuse issues.

I have also encountered young lawyers who were not engaged in misconduct, but were creating negative reputations. In those situations, I consider it my responsibility, as a leader in the legal community, to offer that young lawyer guidance. Of course, I do not talk about specific cases, but instead general guidance on professionalism and decorum.

10. Have you engaged in any fund-raising activities with any social, community, or religious organizations? Please describe.

No. I do make such contributions, but I do not engage in fund-raising.

11. Do you have any business activities that you have remained involved with since your election to the bench?

No.

12. Since Family Court judges do not have law clerks, how do you handle the drafting of orders?

As a general rule, if I rule on the record, I usually direct the prevailing attorney to draft the order and submit to me after they have given opposing counsel the opportunity to review. I have created a bank of form orders that I use for various matters, including, but not limited to, *pro se* divorces, domestic abuse matters, contempt hearings, mediator appointments, and guardian ad litem appointments. On occasions where I take a matter under advisement, I generally draft the final order.

13. What methods do you use to ensure that you and your staff meet deadlines?

My assistant maintains a spreadsheet for tracking all outstanding orders. For matters that I take under advisement, I set calendar reminders to ensure that I timely address such.

14. What specific actions or steps do you take to ensure that the guidelines of the guardian ad litem statutes are followed during the pendency of a case?

I have created a binder for each bench in our circuit where I keep information regarding those who seek appointments in our circuit as guardians ad litem. Individuals in that book are asked to keep the court informed as to their training and experience, as well as their updated contacted information. I also ask them to keep the court informed as to their regular fees and retainer.

Frequently, I schedule second temporary hearings following the initial appointment of the guardian ad litem in order to hear from the guardian and keep each case progressing forward.

15. What is your philosophy on “judicial activism,” and what effect should judges have in setting or promoting public policy?

I do not believe that is our job. We are put in these positions to follow the law that is given to us, not to make law or policy. If I see a state agency that appears in my courtroom, such as SCDSS, SCDJJ, or SCDHEC, administer policies that are inconsistent with state or federal law, I do feel that I have a duty to address that conflict in favor of the Law. Otherwise, I believe my opinions on public policy should remain private.

16. Canon 4 allows a judge to engage in activities to improve the law, legal system, and administration of justice. What activities do you plan to undertake to further this improvement of the legal system?

I regularly take advantage of opportunities to teach continuing legal education. I have also spoke to local school students about the legal system when asked. I have spoken to our local Jaycee chapter about the law as well.

I try to listen to the lawyers about things that they believe could be improved about our system, and where possible, I try to put those recommendations to action. One small example that came from the Newberry Bar shortly after I was elected, was the condition of our Family Court waiting room. I receive regular complaints about the uncomfortable and unsightly condition of the room. In an effort to improve the conditions for these lawyers, with the help of my husband, I remodeled the room during an "in chambers" week. I tore out the 2 x 4 slats that were used as make shift benches. I bought used church pews and refinished them. Finally, I painted the walls, including a mural of Lady Justice. Although this may not be the type activity envisioned by Canon 4, it was a week's worth of hard work that seriously improved the moral of all the lawyers in my county. That, in turn, improved our legal system.

I have assisted with several committees since joining the bench. Our State received a grant to research ways to improve conditions for children who are simultaneously involved with both DSS and DJJ. I worked on the committee that formulated a proposal under this grant, which involved two years of work. We learned that young people involved with DSS are at much higher risk of committing juvenile offenses, and they are much more likely to be detained. Subsequently, we implemented a pilot program in four counties, and Newberry is one county currently participating in that program. We are tracking the pilots in the hopes that we improve outcomes, reduce detentions, and strengthen these family.

I am also currently serving on a similar committee working to implement another pilot program. This program will involve three counties, one of which is Laurens. While Laurens is not my home county, it is located within my Judicial Circuit. This program, known as Safe Baby Courts follows the national model created by the Zero to Three program, and it focuses on young children involved with abuse or neglect. Zero to Three has been implemented in dozens of states nationwide and has proven to reduce or even eliminate recidivism in parents with young children. We are early in this grant, which will implement Safe Baby Counts in three counties in South Carolina, but I am hopeful that it will benefit Laurens, where DSS regularly experiences high recidivism and large numbers of foster placements.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I worked to learn the WebEx system quickly and to train lawyers so we could keep cases moving forward. I worked to develop appropriate notices and started conducting hearings in my home circuit via WebEx almost immediately. I assisted the South Carolina Bar in putting together a one hour virtual training that was offered free to lawyers statewide in an effort to help everyone understand the

basics of WebEx. I also helped other judges practice the technology so they could comfortably implement the program in their home circuits.

17. Do you feel that the pressure of serving as a judge strains personal relationships (i.e. spouse, children, friends, or relatives)? How do you address this?

I do not. My husband and I have changed some of our social activities, and I have to be more conscientious to avoid the appearance of impartiality. Otherwise, I do not feel that the transition to the bench has changed my personal relationships. Yes, I make decisions that have a tremendous impact upon the parties before me. I recognize the weight of that, but I also have been relieved of the obligation of managing a law firm. I no longer have the pressure of carrying my client's burdens. I am not obligated to advocate. There has been a lightening of pressure in that regard, which counterbalances the new stresses of this job.

18. Are you involved in any active investments from which you derive additional income that might impair your appearance of impartiality?

No. Last December, I created two accounts with Robinhood. I put \$200 in each account. My husband and I have done a small amount of day trading as a game to see which of us could earn more money. These accounts are not a part of our long term savings or retirement plans. Our investments are in publically traded companies, none of which have cases before me. I also have investments with Edward Jones that are mostly in mutual funds and are entirely managed by someone else. I have included statements on the Robinhood and Edward Jones Accounts with my Financial Disclosure.

19. Would you hear a case where you or a member of your family held a *de minimis* financial interest in a party involved?

I doubt that I will have to face this issue, but I believe if there were such a situation, I would disclose the interest to the parties and give them opportunity to be heard before I made a decision as to recusal.

20. Are you a member of any organization or association that, by policy or practice, prohibits or limits its membership on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin? If so, please identify the entity and

explain if this organization practices invidious discrimination on any basis.

No.

21. Have you met the mandatory minimum hour's requirement for continuing legal education courses for the past reporting period?

Yes.

22. What do you feel is the appropriate demeanor for a judge and when do these rules apply?

I believe a judge should be compassionate and empathetic at all times. There are times when we need to be firm. For example, we must maintain control over the proceedings. Even when we do have to be stricter, it is important that the parties are always treated with respect and courtesy.

23. Do you feel that it is ever appropriate to be angry with a member of the public, especially with a criminal defendant? Is anger ever appropriate in dealing with attorneys or a pro se litigant?

Anger is not appropriate in the courtroom. I am human, and I admit I have flaws. I sometimes feel frustrated with situations, but try not to be frustrated with people. On occasions, I have to be firm in the courtroom; however, I do not believe I should ever make a party feel that I am angry at them. I try to control the tone of my voice and be ever conscious about my facial expression, because I believe the wrong demeanor from me brings disrepute to the entire justice system. I demand respect for the Court as a whole, and I believe that I must; therefore, show respect to everyone entering my courtroom.

Likewise, I try not to show frustration towards attorneys. If attorneys have caused problems, I try to address those issues outside of the presence of their clients, where possible. I recognize that if I am critical of an attorney in front of their client, the client loses faith in the lawyer. This could even cause them to lose faith in the system as a whole.

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE ANSWERS TO THE ABOVE QUESTIONS ARE TRUE AND COMPLETE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE.

Sworn to before me this ____ day of _____, 2021.

(Signature)

(Print name)
Notary Public for South Carolina
My commission expires: _____