



11th Circuit Historical News

Volume XXII, Number 1 | Winter 2025

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE U.S. COURTS IN THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

Susan Harrell Black: Mentee, Mentor, and Trailblazer

By Bryan S. Gowdy

On June 4, 1992, Senator Connie Mack of Florida introduced U.S. District Judge Susan Harrell Black to the judiciary committee for her nomination to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. The Senator described Judge Black as a “person of exceptional capability and integrity,” an “excellent example for all lawyers,” and “a special role model for women in the legal profession,” as she had been “Jacksonville’s first female prosecutor, assistant city general counsel, and county judge,” and “Florida’s first female federal judge.”¹

The next senator to speak that day—Senator Moynihan of New York—introduced Ms. Sonia Sotomayor, who had been nominated to be a district court judge. After 1992, Judge Sotomayor had a remarkable judicial career that eventually led to her 2009 appointment as the third female justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

But by that day in 1992, Judge Black already had established herself as trailblazer in the legal profession. She would continue her remarkable career for another three plus decades—and that career still marches on today.

EARLY YEARS

Judge Black was born in 1943 in Valdosta, Georgia. Her military family lived around the world. She was the oldest of three children.



Judge Susan Harrell Black served as a U.S. District Court Judge from 1979-1992.

On August 11, 1992, she was confirmed by unanimous consent to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, where she still sits on panels and decides cases.

“Like most first children,” Judge Black once confessed she could be “a little bossy” with her younger siblings. She was given responsibility to care, feed, and tend for her siblings while her family “moved around a lot.” They resided for a time in Denver, Colorado, where her father attended law school, and during another time, in Paris, France. Moving all the time taught Judge Black how to adapt and to make new friends. She later recalled that all the moving “was the best thing that ever happened to [her].”

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 Susan Harrell Black: Mentee, Mentor, and Trailblazer
- 12 From the President
- 13 Gerald Tjoflat: Still Going Strong
- 16 The Weightier Matters of Life and Law: Reflections on the Remarkable Career of Judge L. Scott Coogler
- 21 The Soon-to-be Replaced Fort Lauderdale Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse
- 25 United States District Judge Amy Totenberg
- 33 Judge Julie Sneed’s Investiture
- 38 Everything Matters: A Tribute to the Honorable W. Leon Barfield
- 40 The 2024 Eleventh Circuit Issue from *University of Miami Law Review*
- 42 Atlanta Attorney Emmet Bondurant Awarded the 2024 ABA Medal
- 44 Celebrating Legacy: The Supreme Court Historical Society Honors Chilton D. Varner, Esq., at Atlanta’s High Museum
- 45 Brian J. Suckman, Clerk of Court, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Middle District of Alabama

But home for Judge Black’s family was north Florida. Her mother was from Lake City, and her father was from Live Oak and was born in Mayo. In a 2001 interview, when asked to name her hero, she answered, “my parents,” though she did not appreciate that fact until many years after law school.

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Judge Black has resided in one part of north Florida—Jacksonville—during her entire professional career. She once remarked that it was “natural, of all the places, to go to Jacksonville,” as she “had an aunt and uncle [there] and some cousins,” and she “felt comfortable” in Jacksonville.

As a youngster, Judge Black was an enthusiastic reader and writer. Judge Black’s now-deceased younger brother, Bill Harrell—the founder of a prominent personal injury law firm in Jacksonville—admired how intelligent his sister was. Later in life, Bill often joked that, when he and Judge Black were at the same school, teachers would ask if the family had adopted him.

At an early age, Judge Black decided that she wanted to be a lawyer, though she was “not sure [she] knew what a lawyer was or did.” Later, at age 15, she had a science project and became interested in dentistry. Ultimately, however, law was the “obvious choice” because her “passions” were reading, history, speaking, debating, and writing, but not organic chemistry.

Judge Black’s father—a World War II pilot and prisoner of war—influenced her decision to become a lawyer. As she explained in 2019: “So many of [my father’s] comrades did not come back [from the war], and they left widows with children, and they had no skills. With my sister and me, he wanted to make sure we could support ourselves.”

In a 2001 interview, Judge Black recalled that, at age 8, she told her father—a lawyer himself who did not have an active practice—that she wanted to be a lawyer. When her father introduced her, as a child, to the University of Florida College of Law dean, she and the dean discussed her interest in the law. The dean, Judge Black recalled, said, “Well, you’ll change your mind.” Judge Black did not change her mind. Why? Because, in her own words, “My father never told me I couldn’t do it.”

LAW SCHOOL (1965-67)

After briefly attending Ohio Wesleyan University (1961-62) and Spring Hill College (summer 1962), Judge Black graduated in 1965 from Florida State University, where she was a member of the Kappa Kappa Gamma Sorority and Pi Sigma Alpha Honor Society. Then, Judge Black enrolled in the University of Florida College of Law. She recounted in a 2001 interview that there was a “family joke” that she would have her father’s “full support” and also his “full scholarship if [she] went to the University of Florida College of Law,” meaning she really had only “one choice” where to attend law school. However, she believed that one choice was the right choice.



Judge Black teaching at UF law school in 2019.

“As a youngster, Judge Black was an enthusiastic reader and writer. Her “passions” were reading, history, speaking, debating, and writing,”

“When Judge Black entered law school in 1965, a career for women in the law was unusual. She was one of two women in her 100-member class,”



Judge Black in 1967, the year she graduated from law school.

When Judge Black entered law school in 1965, a career for women in the law was unusual. She was one of two women in her 100-member class, and during her time at the University of Florida, there was never more than five to seven women students in the entire college of law. She first appreciated how few women pursued a legal career on day one of law school. But the paucity of fellow women students never deterred Judge Black.

Judge Black recalled in a 2001 interview that her fellow male students treated her as “one of the boys,” and she credited the connections that she made with them at law school for helping her to advance in her professional career. Nevertheless, at times, law school was awkward, as there were professors at that time who did not believe women should attend law school.

Law school also would have a profound personal impact on Susan Harrell’s life. It was there she met Louis E. Black, III. The two of them lived in the same apartment building, and Lou frequently would see Susan in the building, often accompanied by a young man, whom Lou assumed was her boyfriend.

One day, Susan hurt her ankle on the stairs, and the young

man accompanying Susan—Bill Harrell—introduced his sister to Lou. After learning that the young man was her brother, it did not take long for Lou to court, and then propose to, Susan. They married at the end of December 1967 and remained happily married until Lou's death almost 50 years later in 2017.



Judge Black with her husband Lou circa 1970's

PRACTICING AS A LAWYER (1967-73)

Immediately after law school, Judge Black briefly taught civics at Jacksonville's Ribault High School (Sept.-Dec. 1967). She gained her admission to The Florida Bar on November 10, 1967. She then started her legal career as an attorney for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (1968-69), and later served as an assistant state attorney (1969-72) and assistant city general counsel (1972-73).

With the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Judge Black was a real estate specialist. She negotiated purchases of properties for the government and prepared the necessary legal instruments. The transactions on which she worked included the Cape Canaveral Project, the Cross Florida Barge Project, and structural facilities for national emergencies. Her duties included preparing condemnation suits and serving as an advisor and assistant to the United States Attorney for condemnation trials.

Judge Black also was responsible for drafting contracts for governmental procurements and lease agreements.



As a lawyer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Judge Black acquired properties for the John F. Kennedy Space Center

The next stop in Judge Black's career was the State Attorney's Office for the Fourth Judicial Circuit, which consists of three counties in northeast Florida—Duval (Jacksonville), Nassau, and Clay. Judge Black worked for Ed Austin, a legendary figure in northeast Florida. He was the Fourth Judicial Circuit's first public defender, having been appointed in 1963, shortly after *Gideon v. Wainwright* established a criminal defendant's constitutional right to court-appointed counsel. In 1969, Ed Austin, by election, became the State Attorney (the prosecutor) for the same circuit—a position that he would hold for nearly 20 years. In addition to Judge Black, many of north Florida's leading lawyers and judges worked at one time for Ed Austin. For example, Leander Shaw—the Florida Supreme Court's first African-American chief justice—worked for Ed Austin during the same period that Judge Black did (1969-72). Later, Ed Austin would serve as Jacksonville's mayor.

While serving as an assistant state attorney, Judge Black performed the typical duties of a prosecutor. She exercised discretion in the filing of criminal cases; prepared over two hundred cases for trial; had sole responsibility for the

prosecution of over twenty felony cases that were tried to a jury, including several capital cases; assisted the Attorney General in preparing appellate briefs for oral arguments; and advised the grand jury, requiring the drafting of indictments. She also represented the State of Florida in civil litigation, including bond validation cases, Uniform Reciprocal Enforcement of Support Act cases, extradition cases, and habeas proceedings in state and federal courts.

In 1972, Judge Black began work for the General Counsel of the City of Jacksonville. Ed Austin had been appointed to that position by Jacksonville's then mayor, as Jacksonville was undergoing "consolidation," a process in which the county and city governments were being effectively merged. It is not surprising that Ed Austin would want Judge Black to help him in the challenges that he would face as the General Counsel.

As an assistant to the General Counsel, Judge Black served as the chief legal advisor on all the City's financial matters, and her clients included the City Council's auditor and finance committee and the City's finance department. Her work included municipal taxation, bond validation, ordinance drafting, and giving legal opinions to her clients to enable them to make policy decisions. Judge Black also represented the City's data processing division. In that capacity, she worked on computer procurement contracts for hardware and software, and she drafted and formulated licensing agreements between the City and other governmental entities. She also served various boards—for water quality control, air pollution control, civil service, and the county's schools—primarily by advising them on procedures and due process.

As a practicing lawyer from 1968 to 1973, Judge Black

tried more than 300 cases to verdict or judgment. Her most significant cases included:

- A dispute concerning the meaning of the will of Alfred I. du Pont as it related to the then-second-largest philanthropic trust in the United States. The dispute concerned the trust's obligation regarding the care and treatment of disabled children.
- A public corruption criminal case against a state-court trial judge who had served more than 15 years on the bench. Judge Black—along with Ed Austin and Everett Richardson—prosecuted the case.
- A case that required a father to pay child support, even after the father had committed his children to a child placement agency, which later arranged for the children's natural mother to adopt them. *See Morris v. Stone*, 236 So. 2d 455 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1970).
- A condemnation case involving cemeteries. The case enabled the government to acquire the remaining parcels needed to complete the John F. Kennedy Space Center.
- An administrative case in the spring of 1972 concerning the expulsion of two students at Ribault High School (where Judge Black previously taught civics). The two students fought against a teacher and incited other students to fight. The school, like all schools in the county, was operating under a then-new 1971 federal desegregation order, and during that first year under the order, there was a great deal of rioting and unrest in the county's schools.

Judge Black's experience as a practicing lawyer was vast—litigation and transactional work; criminal, administrative, and civil matters; and many different substantive areas of the law.

This experience would serve her well for the next phase of her career—as a state court judge.

STATE JUDGE (1973–79)

In 1972, Judge Black was elected without opposition to be a state trial judge in the County Court for Duval County, Florida, and she served that court from 1973 to 1975. In 1974, she was elected without opposition to be a trial judge on a higher court—Florida's Fourth Judicial Circuit, the same court where she had a been a prosecutor. Judge Black served that court from 1975 until her appointment to the federal bench in 1979.

In a 2001 interview, she discussed how several judges on the Fourth Judicial Circuit from an older generation—Albert Graessle, John McNatt, Lamar Winegeart, Jr. and Charles Luckie, among others—were her mentors both before and after she joined the bench. They were instrumental in teaching her about the law and how to be a judge. She recalled that, "all she had to do was scoot in [their] doors," and her fellow judges would help her.

Hank Coxe was an assistant state attorney during the years that Judge Black served as a state judge. Mr. Coxe—who later became president of The Florida Bar—recalls Judge Black, in those days, as being part of "an inseparable group of four universally admired and respected persons" who worked in the courthouse; the other three were State Attorney Ed Austin, then-Circuit Judge Ralph "Buddy" Nimmons (later a federal district court judge), and Circuit Judge Everett Richardson. These four persons, Mr. Coxe recalls, "consulted each other, relied on each other, [and] depended on each other."



State Judge Black, sitting, talking to her judicial assistant, Eleanor Bok, who followed her to federal court. Sandy Madison and Cheryl Birkitt later served as Judge Black's assistants in federal court.

During her state judicial service, Judge Black observed that one of the sentencing alternatives for male criminal defendants was placement at a halfway house—as opposed to incarceration or probation. The same alternative, however, was not available for female criminal defendants. Judge Black worked with the probation department to establish a program so female defendants could have a halfway-house alternative. In addition, Judge Black served on several councils, committees, and task forces that worked on issues of parole, probation, and corrections.

As a state trial judge, Judge Black had the opportunity to serve as an associate judge on Florida's appellate courts. She authored some appellate opinions. *See, e.g., Nat'l Life Ins. Co. v. Se. First Nat. Bank of Miami*, 361 So. 2d 432 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1978). During these years, she also was active in The Florida Bar, serving on multiple committees, including those for criminal and civil rules and jury instructions.

Judge Black's remarkable service on the state-court bench was relatively short because President Carter had other plans for her.

“ Before the Carter presidency (January 1977–January 1981), no more than ten women had ever been confirmed to Article III judgeships. ”



Judge Black and her colleagues at her 1979 judicial investiture, U.S. District Court, Middle District of Florida.

FEDERAL DISTRICT JUDGE (1979–92)

Before the Carter presidency (January 1977–January 1981), no more than ten women had ever been confirmed to Article III judgeships.² During President Carter's single term, 40 women were confirmed to such judgeships—29 to the district courts and 11 to the courts of appeals. Susan Harrell Black was one of those judges, being confirmed in 1979 to a newly authorized seat on the U.S. District Court of the Middle District of Florida. In that same year, 22 other women were confirmed to judgeships. The 23 female judges appointed in that single year more than doubled the number of female judges appointed in the prior 190 years.

Forty years later, in 2019, Judge Black was asked to comment about herself and the other 22 female federal judges appointed in 1979: "Our appointments drove the stereotypes away. At long last, women were looked at the same way men were looked at."

In October 2020—as Justice Amy Coney Barrett was about to be confirmed as the fifth female justice to the Supreme Court—a CBS Evening News reporter asked Judge Black what statement President Carter was making in 1979. Judge Black responded, "That

women can do this job, and they did the job, and I think that made it possible for women to follow."

Another judge appointed by President Carter in 1979—Phyllis A. Kravitch of Georgia to the "old" Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals—would later serve with Judge Black on the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals. And two years later, in 1981, Sandra Day O' Connor, nominated by President Reagan, would be the first woman to become a justice to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Judge Black served the Middle District of Florida from 1979 until her appointment to the Eleventh Circuit in 1992. During the final three years (1990–92), she served as the Chief Judge. Of course, it is not possible to summarize the body of her judicial work during this 13-year period. However, in her 1992 submission to the Senate's judiciary committee, Judge Black was asked to list the ten most significant opinions she had written. Those cases included:

- A challenge to a permitting decision by the Coast Guard related to the construction of Jacksonville's Dames Point Bridge. Judge Black determined that "it [was] the province of the Coast Guard, not the Court, to evaluate the conflicting evidence," and that the Coast Guard had "not made a clear

error in judgment." *Port of Jacksonville Mar. Ad Hoc Comm., Inc. v. Hayes*, 485 F. Supp. 741, 747 (M.D. Fla. 1980), *aff'd* 620 F. 2d 567 (1980).

- A case of first impression concerning whether a federal law preempted a Florida law concerning unclaimed property. Judge Black concluded the Florida law was preempted, and the Eleventh Circuit later agreed. *Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Fla., Inc. v. Dep't of Banking & Fin.*, 613 F. Supp. 188 (M.D.) Fla. 1985), *aff'd* 791 F. 2d 1501 (11th Cir. 1986).
- A case in which a juror in a famous criminal trial (involving drug lord Carlos Lehder) alleged that her employer terminated her employment because of her jury service. The employer argued that the juror had no right to have her claim heard by a jury. Judge Black disagreed, concluding that the juror did have such a right under a statute and the Seventh Amendment. *Juror 157 v. Corp. Defendant*, 710 F. Supp. 324 (M.D. Fla. 1989). The juror's counsel was a renowned civil rights attorney, William "Bill" Sheppard—also, like Judge Black, a 1967 graduate of the University of Florida College of Law—who was featured in the Winter 2023 edition of this publication.

Hank Coxe often appeared before Judge Black, both in federal district court and state court. He recalls that Judge Black's courtroom style was different from other judges: "The lawyer who stepped out of line for any reason, with or without a jury, regardless of the egregiousness of the conduct, received nothing more than, 'Mr. ---, I don't think so.' It stopped right there. No yelling, no castigation, no storming off the bench, no order to approach sidebar, no embarrassment."

Just as she had done during her service on the state bench, Judge

Black—while carrying the caseload of a district court judge—served many committees and voluntary bar organizations. For example, Judge Black served on committees related to court administration and case management for the Judicial Conference of the United States. Perhaps her most significant contribution during this period was her work for the American Inns of Court, a subject addressed separately in this article.

Judge Black's direct service to the Middle District of Florida concluded because of another presidential nomination—this time, by a Republican president.

FEDERAL APPELLATE JUDGE (1992–PRESENT)

On March 10, 1992, President George H.W. Bush nominated Judge Black to fill a vacancy on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. She was nominated to succeed Judge Thomas Alonzo Clark. According to a press report, Judge Black's confirmation was delayed because of a dispute between, on the one hand, Senators Biden (Delaware) and Metzenbaum (Ohio), and,

on the other hand, Senator Shelby (Alabama) concerning the nomination of her future colleague, Edward Carnes of Alabama. As a result, Senator Shelby reportedly blocked several nominees (including Judge Black) until the dispute over Judge Carnes' nomination was resolved.

During her confirmation hearing, Senator Edward Kennedy (Massachusetts) asked Judge Black to explain the work she had done, as a state judge, to ensure that female criminal defendants had the same sentencing alternatives as their male counterparts had. He called that work "commendable." Senator Kennedy also asked Judge Black to explain her work for her church; she had assisted in outreach to single parents to provide their children "substantive programs," like an art program, and not just "baby-sitting or day care." Senator Kennedy found Judge Black's involvement in her community to be "very impressive," and he announced at the hearing that he "would be delighted to support [her] nomination." Judge Black was confirmed by unanimous consent on August 11, 1992.

Judge Black would remain an active judge on the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals for eighteen and half years until February 25, 2011, when she took senior status, allowing her to reduce her caseload. To this day, however, Judge Black still sits on panels and decides cases. See, e.g., *Ramirez v. Walmart, Inc.*, No. 23-13702, 2024 WL 4880378, at *1 (11th Cir. Nov. 25, 2024). In recent years, she has elected to sit on the en banc Eleventh Circuit when permitted by law to do so. See *Hoefer v. Marks*, 993 F.3d 1353 (11th Cir. 2021) (en banc). As a senior judge, she has visited and sat on panels in other circuits. See, e.g., *T-Mobile USA Inc. v. Selective Ins. Co. of Am.*, 908 F.3d 581 (9th Cir. 2018).

Having now served more than 32 years as a federal appellate judge, Judge Black has decided thousands of cases and authored hundreds of opinions. Unlike her district court opinions, the author does not have access to a list—like the one Judge Black provided to the Senate in 1992—of her most significant appellate opinions. The author will not hazard a guess as to which of Judge Black's opinions are her most significant ones. Instead, the remainder of this article focuses on Judge Black's commitment to the inns of court, professionalism, mentoring, legal education, and her family.



Judge Black sitting on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, with Judge Peter T. Fay (deceased) to her right, and to her left, Judge Adalberto Jordan, who succeeded to Judge Black's seat when she assumed senior status in 2011.

“The Senator described Judge Black as a “person of exceptional capability and integrity,” an “excellent example for all lawyers,” and “a special role model for women in the legal profession,”

INNS OF COURT, PROFESSIONALISM, MENTORING, AND LEGAL EDUCATION

Judge Black was an instrumental, early leader in the American Inns of Court movement. Chief Justice Warren E. Burger and others discussed in the 1970s the concept of borrowing from England the inns of court. The Chief Justice was concerned that American lawyers were lacking in professionalism, ethics, and civility and that the quality of their work suffered. In 1980, the first inn of court was established in Utah.

Not long thereafter, an *ad hoc* committee of the Judicial

Conference of the United States was formed to consider whether a method of developing professionalism and mentoring could be instituted in the United States. Chief Justice Burger appointed Judge Black, then a district court judge, to be a member of that committee. The Judicial Conference of the United States endorsed the concept in 1985, and the American Inns of Court Foundation was organized. Judge Black was one of the Foundation's first seven trustees, and she served in that capacity from 1985 to 1991.

In 1985, Judge Black and the then-Dean of the University of Florida College of Law (Frank T. Read) organized, and obtained a charter for, the Chester Bedell Inn of Court—the thirteenth inn in the United States and the first inn in Florida. Judge Black served as the Bedell Inn's president from 1985 to 1988 and from 1991 to 1992, and she has served on the Inn's executive committee since 1988.



Judge Black receiving in May 2022 from Chief Judge William Pryor the American Inns of Court's Professionalism Award for the Eleventh Circuit.

The mission of the American Inns of Court has been, and still is, to foster excellence in professionalism, ethics, civility, and

legal skills in the legal profession. Inn members seek to achieve these goals through education and mentoring activities.

In a 2020 speech, Judge Black touched on why the namesake of the inn that she co-founded—Chester Bedell—exemplified the values of the American Inns of Court: "I did know [Chester Bedell], and the Chief Justice Warren Burger also personally knew him....[The Chief Justice] once told me that he envisioned Chester Bedell as the lawyer who would serve as a model for the goals of... civility, professionalism, and ability. He elevated our profession through a lifetime of dedicated, competent, and ethical practice, and he exemplified the values of professionalism and independence...."

One senses from her 2020 speech that Chester Bedell was a mentor to Judge Black—the same role she would play for so many.

In a 2001 interview, Judge Black was asked about the importance of mentoring. She responded by discussing her interactions with Chief Justice Burger and the mission of the inns of court: "Chief Justice Burger... had a concept regarding mentoring based on the English inns of court where lawyers would not go to law school [and instead]...would go to an inn and they would learn from the older lawyers how to practice, they would learn the law, they would learn the ethics...., and Chief Justice Burger thought that this could be used in the United States [in] some form....[H]e saw something that we are all seeing now and that is the need for mentorsThat's the concept, that's the purpose of the inn is to have older judges and lawyers serving as role models and also [as] someone to call"

Judge Black, however, has done more than just talk about mentoring. She herself has mentored many judges and lawyers.

Judge Black's extraordinary life of mentoring others was exhibited when many of her mentees and others came together to nominate her for two awards of the American Inns of Courts—(1) the Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Award for Professionalism and Ethics (2023) and (2) the Professionalism Award for the Eleventh Circuit (2022)—as well as for The Florida Bar's William H. Hoeveler Award (2012). She earned all three awards. But what is truly remarkable are not the awards themselves, but rather what her mentees and others had to say about Judge Black.

For example, Virginia Norton is currently one of 35 circuit judges in the Fourth Judicial Circuit, and ten of those judges (28.6%) are women. Judge Norton wrote about Judge Black:

As a little girl, I would often see Judge Black and her family at lunch on Sundays. ... I always had a ton of questions for Judge Black. I was so excited to know that a girl could be a judge!

Judge Black always had time for me and treated me with the greatest of respect. She was the first judge that I ever met, and consequently, represented all judges to me.

Through her actions, Judge Black taught me that judges were patient, thoughtful, listened, and were sincerely interested in what people had to say.

Through the years, Judge Black has been a constant source of advice, wisdom, and strength for me. Obviously, I have turned to Judge Black as I have pursued my legal career. However, it would minimize her role in my life to call Judge Black a mentor. Instead, I would prefer to say that Judge Black represents.

what I can only hope to be as a family member, citizen, and jurist.

A former law clerk, Elaine Metlin—who had a 33-year legal career and who now serves on the Resource Board for the National Association of Women Judges—wrote in 2012:

As a female jurist, Judge Black was one of my first role models. Her success on the bench inspired me to advance the cause of women lawyers throughout my legal career. Judge Black's winning combination of intellect, strength, elegance, humor and charm made her a force to be reckoned with, in and outside the courtroom. I am sure that her influence helped me to succeed as a female litigator.

Judge Black, however, did not limit her mentoring to women. She also mentored many men. For example, U.S. District Judge Timothy Corrigan—who, like Judge Black, served as the Chief Judge of the Middle District of Florida—wrote in 2012:

[Judge Black] has encouraged and advised countless young lawyers who have needed guidance in their legal careers. I have personally benefitted from Judge Black's encouragement and support. When my initial efforts to become a judge were unsuccessful, she went out of her way to encourage me to persevere. Once I became a judge, she has always been available to counsel with me.

Another example of Judge Black's long-term mentoring impact is Robert Meynardie, who practices in Atlanta. He wrote in 2023:

Although this summer marks thirty years since my clerkships ended, I continue to reference that experience often. At the trial court, I was blessed to witness not only Judge Black's intellect but the patience and grace she exhibited to all who appeared before her. As a young, newly



Judge Black at the U.S. Supreme Court in October 2023 with friends, colleagues, and former law clerks to receive the American Inns of Court Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Award.

Pictured Top Row: L-R: Marianne Trost, Thomas Burns, Bryan Gowdy, Donald Peele, Jeff Gibson; Middle Row: Grace Taskinsoy, David Petron, Melanie Katsur, Abby Dennis, Brendan Gardiner, Allyn Gibson, Judge Joel Dubina, Allegra Lawrence-Hardy, Judge Virginia Norton; Bottom Row: Aree Panich, Judge Frank Hull, Lauren Petron, Judge Susan Black, Meredith Dresner, Jeremy Dresner, Beth Dubina, Annette Hemingway, Kitty Phillips.

minted lawyer I cannot say I shared her patience but in thirty years of practice as an advocate, I have tried to emulate it—and sometimes succeed.

Judge Black's peers also recognized her exceptional success in mentoring others. John DeVault—a former president of The Florida Bar and Judge Black's law school classmate—wrote: "[Judge Black] has served as a wonderful role model for so many young lawyers, both women and men. She is an inspiration to all who know her and those who have practiced before her."

In addition to mentoring, Judge Black during her career has emphasized professionalism and civility. When asked in a 2001 interview to distinguish between an ethical and a professional attorney, Judge Black responded: "Playing by the rules, treating others with civility, treating your colleagues, treating your clients, treating your adversary ... as your mother

would say [with] good manners and ... with civility." Judge Black expressed the view that a lawyer's role was to "help] others not in a sense of doing social work but in a sense of being a professional."

Judge Black's former law clerks and her peers can confirm Judge Black's commitment to professionalism and civility. For example, Allegra J. Lawrence-Hardy—a former law clerk who practices in Atlanta—wrote in 2023:

Judge Black is an important reminder ... what is possible when we are open to one another's opinions, accepting of our differences without judgment, committed to civil and respectful dialogue, steadfast in our ethics, and sincerely caring about one another as advocates and as human beings. ... Judge Black reminds us all that we can be adversarial without being adversaries and we can protect our clients while still maintaining a level of decorum and civility.

A law school classmate and former president of The Florida Bar—Benjamin Hill, III—likewise wrote in 2012 about Judge Black's work with the inn of courts and as judge to "promot[e] professionalism and civility in the law."

Not only have peers, mentees, and former law clerks recognized Judge Black for her excellence, so too have her colleagues. For instance, Judge Joel Dubina wrote in 2023:

Judge Black and I have worked closely as colleagues



Judge Frank Hull, Judge Joel Dubina, Judge Susan Black, and Beth Dubina at the U.S. Supreme Court in October 2023.

for over 30 years. I also consider her a close personal friend. From personal experience, I can attest that Judge Black is passionate about civility, the nobility of the law, and the legal profession, qualities which the Inns of Court espouses.

Similarly, another colleague, Judge Frank Hull, wrote in 2023 about Judge Black:

[F]or 50 years she has epitomized, on a daily basis, what it means to exhibit excellent judicial demeanor, civility and professionalism with both lawyers and her judicial colleagues at all times and in all places — both in

and out of the courtroom. She leads and inspires others by example. No one has been more committed to the highest standards in the legal and judicial system than Judge Black; no one has shown more professionalism, civility or ethics and integrity than Judge Black ...

The sentiments expressed in these letters are a small sample of what mentees, peers, and judges have said about Judge Black's devotion to mentoring, professionalism, and civility.

Finally, undergirding Judge Black's commitment to professionalism has been her commitment to legal education. As noted above, to foster excellence in professionalism, ethics, and civility, the American Inns of Court encourages not only mentoring but also legal education. The historical record shows that Judge Black, throughout her career, has been extensively involved in legal education. She advanced her own legal education from 1982 to 1984 by obtaining a master-of-laws degree from the University of Virginia. In a letter, Judge Dubina characterized Judge Black as being "active in judicial education." The following are some of Judge Black's education activities, as summarized by Judge Dubina:

- Chairman of the Education Committee of the Florida Conference of Circuit Judges.
- Dean of the College for New Florida Circuit and County Court Judges.
- Faculty member for the National Judicial College in Reno, Nevada.
- Taught at the National Institute for Trial Advocacy at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and at seminars throughout the United States for the Federal Judicial Center.
- For over fifteen years, taught the Federal Appellate Practice course at Duke University School of Law.

Given all these activities, one wonders how Judge Black had any time for her family. But she made time for her family and many others.

JUDGE BLACK'S FAMILY

No article about Judge Black would be complete without discussing her family. As mentioned earlier, Judge Black met her husband, Lou, when they both were attending law school. They were married from December 1967 until Lou's passing in 2017.

Lou loved traveling, a passion that Judge Black and their daughter, Leigh Elizabeth, also still share. Before marrying Judge Black, Lou had studied or worked in Mexico,



Judge Susan Black with her daughter, Leigh Elizabeth, and her husband, Lou, unveiling her judicial portrait in March 2012

Columbia, and Guatemala, and had learned to speak Spanish, a skill he never lost. He also became fluent in French. Lou owned and operated several businesses in Jacksonville, including Avondale Limousine Service, Antique and Unique Transportation, Park 'N Fly, and most successfully, Avondale Travel Bureau. Lou opened the Avondale Travel Bureau in 1974, and when he sold it in 1989, it had become one of the nation's twenty-five largest agencies with nearly fifty offices.

There was not a trip or cruise Lou would want to miss. He traveled widely, visited over one hundred countries, took over one hundred cruises, and visited six continents.

Lou also was a licensed real estate broker, and during his 50-year career, he owned and managed several pieces of commercial real estate. He was involved in a variety of professional and civic activities, including a rotary club, a travel professionals' organization (of

which he was president), his and Judge Black's church (where he served as a deacon), and Goodwill Industries of North Florida (for which he was a board member for 25 years).

Lou loved officiating high school basketball and football games. He was a member of two officiating associations for a total of 45 years, and he officiated over one thousand games.

The author's most endearing memory of Lou is from the Christmas parties that he and Judge Black frequently hosted for families with small children. Lou routinely appeared as Santa Claus at these parties. The author is not sure who had more fun—the children visiting with Santa Claus or Lou playing the role of Santa Claus. Lou and Judge Black also would frequently entertain Judge Black's law clerks at their home, as well as many others.

Their daughter, Leigh Elizabeth, recently commented to the author how both her father and mother were able to pursue their respective—and very different—careers. Each of her parents were very independent, but they and their careers complemented one another.

Leigh Elizabeth also noted that both her parents were always there for her. As many of Judge Black's law clerks know from the daily lunch in chambers, Leigh Elizabeth as a child was active in equestrian sports. Leigh Elizabeth characterized her mother as a "great barn mom." While juggling her judicial duties, Judge Black also would frequently visit the barn, sometimes daily, to make sure everything was right with Leigh Elizabeth's horse. During Leigh Elizabeth's years in elementary school, Judge Black would attend chapel with her daughter every Thursday. And during the high-school years—when Leigh Elizabeth competed in track and field—Judge Black would stay to the "bitter end" of every track meet, no matter how busy she may have been at work.



Judge Black blazing a trail on the glaciers of western Canada in 2022.

Nowadays, Leigh Elizabeth—who married George Israel three weeks before Lou passed away—is all grown up. She followed the path of her father's career, as she re-founded Avondale Travel in 2012, of which she is still the president and owner. She and George have given Judge Black two beautiful granddaughters—twins—who have been featured very prominently in Judge Black's holiday cards to her former law clerks for the last few years.

Those holiday cards illustrate that Judge Black—like Lou and Leigh Elizabeth—loves to travel. In 2023 alone, she was able to travel to Casablanca, Tangier, Cádiz, Málaga, Cartagena, Majorca, Tarragona, Barcelona, Cornwall, and Bordeaux—in addition to trips with Leigh, George, and the grand-twins to the mountains of North Carolina and Lake Oconee in Georgia. On top of that, in October 2023, she was able to reunite with many former law clerks, colleagues, and friends at the U.S. Supreme Court, where the American Inns of Courts presented her with the Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Award for Professionalism and Ethics.

Judge Black shows no signs of



Judge Black's son-in-law George Israel, granddaughter Eloise, daughter Leigh Elizabeth, and in Judge Black's lap, grand-daughter Patterson, celebrating Thanksgiving 2023.

slowing down. Those who have had their lives enriched by Judge Black—including the author—are undoubtedly grateful for her continued warmth, kindness, friendship, and careful mentoring.

CONCLUSION

Judge Black is a trailblazer. Early in her legal career, she had several role models and mentors to help her blaze that trail—men like her father, Chester Bedell, Ed Austin, the judges at the Fourth Judicial Circuit, and others. But, at that time, there were few women in the legal profession who could serve as role models and mentors. Judge Black helped, immensely, to change that construct. She has been an exemplary role model and mentor not only for female judges and lawyers, but for all judges and lawyers.³

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University of Florida Levin College of Law. He clerked for U.S. District Judge Maurice M. Paul (1999-2000) and U.S. Circuit Judge Susan H. Black (2000-01). Since 2001, he has practiced law in Jacksonville, where he and his wife have raised their five children.

ENDNOTES

1 Judge Black also has been credited with being Florida's first female state circuit judge. See Wikipedia, List of First Women Lawyers and Judges in Florida, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_first_women_lawyers_and_judges_in_Florida#cite_note-:3-16; Caroline Emery, *History of the Jacksonville Bar Association*, Jacksonville Daily Record (March 3, 2003).

2 Mary L. Clark, *Carter's Ground-breaking Appointment of Women to the Federal Bench: His Other "Human Rights" Record*, 11 J. of Gender, Social Pol'y & the Law 1131, 1132-33 (2011); United States Courts, 40 Years Later, *Pioneering Women Judges Savor Place in History* (Aug. 14, 2019), <https://www.uscourts.gov/news/2019/08/14/40-years-later-pioneering-women-judges-savor-place-history>. The Clark article

reports that eight women had been appointed before the Carter presidency, while the U.S. Courts article reports the number was ten.

3 This article is based on a wide variety of public sources, interviews of those who know Judge Black, and the author's own personal knowledge. Upon request, the author can provide a bibliography of sources and a footnoted draft of this article. The author did not interview Judge Black for this article. The author thanks Judge Joel Dubina, Judge Frank Hull, Hank Coxe, John DeVault, Mary "Kitty" Phillips, Meredith Ross, and Leigh Elizabeth Black Israel for reading drafts of this article and providing invaluable feedback and information. The author also thanks Allegra Lawrence-Hardy and her firm for their assistance, and he thanks Cheryl Birkitt and Darby Robinson for gathering most the photos appearing in this article. Finally, the author thanks the former law clerks and others who wrote letters supporting Judge Black's award nominations, only a few of which are quoted in this article; each letter, by itself, merits publication. Any errors are solely the responsibility of the author.

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