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IWIRC NEWSLETTER

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Newly Appointed Judge Profiles

IWIRC MEMBER PROFILES: RECENTLY APPOINTED JUDGES

IWIRC is thrilled to profile some of our members who are also recently appointed bankruptcy judges. In this issue, they share with us some insights and thoughts.

Judge Lisa Beckerman



Have you always wanted to be a judge?

No, I did not even think about it until I was a young partner and Judge Blackshear suggested to me that I apply. I was just beginning my career as partner so it was not something that I decided that I could do then.

Who has had a major impact on how you practice law?

My former partners, in particular Danny Golden, Fred Hodara and Robin Keller.

What was the most valuable advice you received in the process of applying to be a judge?

Many people told me that I would not be selected the first time that I applied and that I would need to apply multiple times. That was true as it took me two times in the SDNY. That advice is also true for many other districts. For one of my friends in another district, it took 6 times for her to be selected. I was also lucky to receive advice along the way from former Judges Gerber, Peck and Cyganowski and also from certain of the current bankruptcy judges in the SDNY and Judges Diehl, Baer and Mitchell.

What advice would you have for someone seeking to become a judge?

My general advice is work hard, dream high and persevere. You can come to the bench from various backgrounds. In our district, we have had a number of bankruptcy judges who were bankruptcy partners at large international law firms like I was before joining the bench but we have also had bankruptcy judges who prior to joining the bench worked in the Bankruptcy Court system (the US Trustee and the Clerk's offices), the US Attorney's office, state judges, and commercial litigators. In other districts, there are also bankruptcy judges who were career law clerks, Chapter 13 trustees, and law school professors. I am sure that there are many other diverse career paths.

My other piece of advice is to get out there and get involved. Find things outside of your job that you like and do them. I have been involved in a various professional organizations, charities and the advisory board of my law school during my career. The first professional organization that I joined was IWIRC and I still have a couple of close friends that I met at IWIRC events when I was a midlevel associate.

What skills have been most important to you in your career, and how did you develop them?

At my former law firm, I was considered to be very knowledgeable of the bankruptcy code and bankruptcy rules (some of my former associates called me the oracle, the professor or the answer lady). But, the bankruptcy code and the bankruptcy rules take a lot of years to master. In addition to learning on the job, when I was younger, I tried to read and learn the bankruptcy code outside of the job and also to take advantage of CLE programs. Developing my own style as a lawyer was also something that was harder to master as a woman, to be tough but not perceived as a bitch. I am not a yeller or a screamer or a curser. I found that my people skills were almost or at times more important than my legal skills, especially when representing official committees and ad hoc groups of creditors.

What has been the most surprising thing about the job?

Well, I have not been on the job for very long so everything is fairly new to me. I am still getting used to the bureaucracy. I have been surprised at how much control I have over my schedule, at least at this point.

Anything you think you'll miss about practicing law?

My colleagues at Akin Gump, especially my partners. I was there for almost 22 years and I would have stayed there until I chose to retire if I had not been offered this amazing job.

What are your favorite activities when not working?

Pre-pandemic, going to the theater, ballet, opera, Carnegie Hall and museums and of course, eating out in restaurants. During the pandemic, I have been to the Metropolitan Museum of Art a few times and when the weather was good, have eaten outside at a few restaurants but that is it. I have been cooking a lot more and spending much more time with Rob and my 17 ½ year old cat Colin.

Judge Elizabeth Gunn



Have you always wanted to be a judge?

As a kid, I always wanted to be a lawyer. I'd say that morphed into being a judge about 3-4 years in to practice.

Who has had a major impact on how you practice law?

So many people! My "sponsor" Roy M. Terry, Jr., the other attorneys I've practiced with/against, the judges I've had the honor to appear in front of and now get to call colleagues, the trustees I've represented or litigated against. Hard to name just one.

What was the most valuable advice you received in the process of applying to be a judge?

Understand the role that the judiciary plays in the law – the role of the court as a public servant. And remember, the most important decision a bankruptcy judge will make is not whether a chapter 11 investor will be subordinated, but whether an individual debtor will keep their house or car.

What advice would you have for someone seeking to become a judge?

Write, speak, be involved with organizations within the chosen field. Do not spend all your time in your office working. When you say “yes” do a good, if not great, job at the position or task. Your work product is important, but you have to consider and invest in your “personal brand” and commit to building it over time (and many times out of pocket).

What skills have been most important to you in your career, and how did you develop them?

Public speaking, writing – both pleadings and professional articles, and networking. I am naturally not a fan of crowds of people, and one of the main things I had to focus on as a young attorney was the ability to talk to anyone in a room. Similarly, the ability to clearly express thoughts, opinions, or argument in court or at other engagements is key to being asked back to speak (same applies for writing!)

What has been the most surprising thing about the job?

The variety of issues raised in cases. I knew to expect some “transition/ learning pains” in moving from attorney to judge, but the different issues that are necessary to consider i did not fully anticipate. Also, the difficulty in ruling on a discrete motion without reviewing many related pleadings or documents not necessarily raised by the parties. I keep promising my clerks that some day I’ll stop over-preparing, but no time soon. Finally – just how busy I am handling matters that are not related to upcoming hearings.

What are you most excited for?

Getting to help make and interpret law. The ability to meet and learn from all my new colleagues. And, since I’m a COVID appointee, my first in-person hearings when I get to wear my robe.

Anything you think you'll miss about practicing law?

Some of the collegiality that judges necessarily have to distance themselves from with members of the bar. Having most people call me by my first name.

What are your favorite activities when not working?

Running, reading, counted cross-stitch, spending time with my kids (10 and 8) and going to their various activities, and a new COVID-addition: adult gymnastics class.

Judge Lori Vaughan



Have you always wanted to be a judge?
Always seems like a long time, but yes, for several years I knew that becoming a judge would be the pinnacle of my career.

Who has had a major impact on how you practice law?

I think I have taken guidance from a number of lawyers I have worked with over the years, both in my firms and outside.

What was the most valuable advice you received in the process of applying to be a judge?

Be active in the bar and community.

What advice would you have for someone seeking to become a judge?

The best advice I can give is to obtain as much experience as you can. Volunteer or find opportunities to get into court and to gain a variety of experiences. It will help you (I think) in the judge selection, but it will also help you in your practice.

What skills have been most important to you in your career, and how did you develop them?

Public speaking and writing. Courtroom experience is valuable. The best way to develop these skills is through practice, but there are also some great written materials on both. Don't be afraid to pick up a primer on grammar or the art of cross examination.

What has been the most surprising thing about the job?

The quiet. I am not used to having such a quiet office (and its not just because of COVID).

What are you most excited for?

No timesheets!!!!

Anything you think you'll miss about practicing law?

The freedom to spend time with lawyers. Not much else.



IWIRC

P.O. Box 249 | Stanardsville, VA 22973 | USA

news@iwirc.com

www.iwirc.com