

Judge James Nutt

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By: Terry Resk

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If you ever have the chance to chat with Judge James Nutt at a social gathering – grab it! Whether you ask him about his trekking in Nepal, sixteen consecutive days in the primitive wilderness, biking from Montreal to the Pacific Ocean, or riding his bicycle 580 miles through Alaska, his stories could keep you mesmerized for hours.

Judge Nutt even manages to make his professional career fascinating. While with the South Florida Water Management District, his ingenuity and perseverance resulted in taking a case involving the Clean Water Act to the United States Supreme Court. His pride in the District is apparent, and rightfully so. Few of us realize that it is the largest landowner in Florida with over 1600 employees at its peak. While at the District from 1995 until his December 2017 appointment to the Bench by Governor Scott, he handled a wide range of issues, practicing primarily in federal courts and becoming proficient in the appellate sphere. He is the only employee of the District ever to earn the Employee of the Year distinction two separate times.

As important as the District has been to the judge, his family has had an even greater influence on him. While his grandparents played a significant role in raising him, he gained a lifelong love of learning from his mother, a school teacher and dean with a Ph.D. in education. His father was a well-read ink artist and Virginia historian who also helped to fuel Judge Nutt's fascination with learning, arts, and history, including that of his own family.

One of the judge's grandfathers served as an Ohio Senator, working to pass clean water legislation, while his other grandfather – a lobbyist for a chemical company – often had competing goals. It may be more than coincidental that forty years later, their grandson took a case involving the Clean Water Act to the United States Supreme Court.

Despite his worldwide experiences, Judge Nutt considers himself a country boy at heart and has deep roots in South Florida. His family moved to Broward County when he was 11, and he began his legal career here as an intern to Judge Payne. While his accomplishments are many, he is most proud of his involvement in – and leadership of – organizations and programs which help single mothers and abused women. It was through this work that he was recognized as the Domestic Violence Man of the Year.

Although Judge Nutt does not have much time for leisure since his investiture, he does love to read and ride bikes and enjoys traveling with his wife, Cheryl Kempf, who recently retired

from FP&L after practicing with its legal department for over 20 years.

One thing that those appearing before Judge Nutt should keep in mind is that he believes that the “best lawyers make an effort to inform.” In his courtroom, therefore, you should take the steps necessary to educate him about your case and the applicable law; in any other setting, however, I strongly suggest that you convince him to describe for you at least one of his many adventures (did I mention that he is also a licensed pilot?).

The breadth of experience which Judge Nutt gained while at the District prepared him well for the judiciary; as much as he continues to respect his long-time former employer and the work which it does, his transition to a judicial role was the logical next step. In addition to the legal challenges themselves, he enjoys the camaraderie among his fellow jurists. His deep appreciation for the law and its institutions will benefit all of us during his tenure on the Bench.

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