

Judge Maxine Cheesman

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By Andrea McMillan

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A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things that renew humanity – Buddha

By all reports, Judge Maxine Cheesman has led a life of self-discipline, scholarly pursuit, and selfless devotion to others. She is the first African-American and Jamaican to be elected judge in Palm Beach County, without first being appointed. On March 1, 2018, she will formally be invested as a circuit judge, filling the vacancy created by Judge Pete Blanc's retirement. Judge Cheesman, who will assume her position in Division FA/IB (family/probate) in the main courthouse, will replace Judge Janis Keyser in that division.

Judge Cheesman was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, in a family that valued education and high achievement. She had a very solid primary education in the Jamaican school system, modeled after the British system. Upon graduating high school, she enrolled in the University of the West Indies, where she earned a BS in Chemistry, with first-class honors. In 1979, she migrated with her family to Miami.

Upon migrating, Judge Cheesman started working in a small private lab laboratory. After toiling diligently at the lab for some time, Judge Cheesman asked her boss for a raise. Her boss explained that he was not authorized to give her the raise, and suggested that she request one directly from the lab owner. After speaking with the lab owner, Judge Cheesman returned to the lab, where her boss was eager to find out whether she received the raise. "Not only did I get one," she told him, "You did too!" Not only had Judge Cheesman requested her own pay raise, she also requested one for her boss, believing he deserved one, as well. Needless to say, her boss was thrilled.

Impressed with her advocacy (and her kindness), Judge Cheesman's boss, who had (not so secretly) taken a special liking to her, now liked her even more. He invited her out on a date. That date began a romance that blossomed into a marriage that has lasted thirty-three years.

Judge Cheesman's former boss, turned husband, is Everard Cheesman, a gentle man now confined to a wheelchair due to multiple sclerosis. Judge Cheesman's eyes light up when talking about Everard, whom she affectionately calls "Cheesy." In spite of his condition, Everard Cheesman maintains a remarkable "can do" spirit that Judge Cheesman and so many others respect and admire. Judge Cheesman is unswervingly devoted to him, and he

to her. She describes him as her biggest supporter and advocate. Theirs is a special union. They still enjoy a beautiful and fulfilling life together.

Between 1980 and 1992, Judge Cheesman worked as a hydrogeologist and chemist in Miami with the Florida Department of Environmental Resources Management. She also served as a part-time adjunct professor at Miami-Dade Community College, teaching undergraduate courses in Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science, and General Science. Eventually, she earned an MS degree in Organic Chemistry in 1987 from the University of Miami.

Judge Cheesman subsequently spent nine years as a Division Director with the South Florida Water Management District. At one point, she served as an expert witness on water quality monitoring issues in litigation handled by John Fumero, then District General Counsel. Impressed with Judge Cheesman's aptitude for understanding and applying legal concepts, Mr. Fumero encouraged her to apply to law school. In 2001, while still working full-time at the District, Judge Cheesman enrolled in law school at Nova Southeastern University. In 2004 she graduated *cum laude*. Judge Cheesman largely credits John Fumero for positively impacting the trajectory of her life by urging her to become a lawyer.

Between 2005 and 2007, Judge Cheesman served as Director of the Real Estate Division at the District. In 2007 she began a solo law practice. Her firm eventually evolved into the Law Offices of Cheesman and Varner, a two-attorney firm, handling a variety of litigation and transactional matters, including real estate, title services, mortgages, probate, contract matters, fair housing litigation, bankruptcy, and employment disputes.

In 2014, Judge Cheesman ran for a circuit court judgeship here, but lost in a three-person race. In spite of her loss, Judge Cheesman enjoyed campaigning, learned a lot from the experience, and decided to run again.

Judge Cheesman has led a life of public service and selfless devotion to others. In 2012, the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County honored her with its "And Justice For All" Award for her outstanding *pro bono* work. For almost forty years, Judge Cheesman has also fed the poor and homeless-work she has done quietly and faithfully.

While working in Miami shortly after migrating, Judge Cheesman noticed the substantial number of hungry, homeless people. She started cooking chicken, rice, and vegetables in her own home, and driving around the streets of Miami, feeding approximately 100 people each week. She did this for several years.

When she started working at the District, Judge Cheesman joined the feeding ministry at Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church in West Palm Beach. For the last twenty-three years, Judge Cheesman has shown up in the Tabernacle kitchen at 6 am to help prepare meals for hungry, homeless people who come there to be fed. After feeding those people, Judge Cheesman and other members of the ministry take food to homeless people in Curry Park

in West Palm Beach. They started doing so at Judge Cheesman's urging. Sandra Close Turnquest, a community leader who works in that ministry, describes Judge Cheesman as "having a heart of gold."

Judge Cheesman's background certainly sensitizes her to the life experiences and concerns of many different types of people. She looks forward to dispensing justice fairly, and making lawyers and litigants feel they have been heard and treated with respect in her courtroom. We welcome her to the bench.

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