

# Judge Sherri Collins

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By Andrea McMillan

“Follow the rules and do the right thing”: this is the mantra of Judge Sherri Collins, who was appointed to the county bench in December 2016, filling the vacancy created by the elevation of Judge Dalia Weiss to the circuit bench.

Judge Collins was born in Philadelphia, the last of three children born to a very bright tax and estate planning lawyer and his microbiologist wife. Her father graduated first in his law school class, and earned the highest score on the Philadelphia bar exam at the time. When Judge Collins was five years old, her family moved to unincorporated Dade County, and her mother took a job at Miami Children’s Hospital. Although she was the baby of the family, Judge Collins learned to be extremely self-sufficient at a young age. Her mother, Francine, states that Judge Collins was “a very mature five-year old.” Francine and her husband encouraged that five year-old to be intellectually curious, and to first seek answers to her questions herself, before coming to them for answers.

Many weekends, while her mother worked, a young Judge Collins assisted her father, either working in his law office or accompanying him as he made house calls to his clients. She observed the professional, yet caring, way in which her father treated his clients, and that was imprinted upon her. Judge Collins strives to treat everyone with dignity and respect, the way her father did.

Many judges and lawyers consistently describe Judge Collins as having an extraordinary work ethic, a trait that Judge Collins’ parents also instilled in her. Judge Collins states that she has been continuously employed since she was a teenager, working, at that time as a babysitter and a mall food-court employee. While enrolled at Miami Killian Senior High School, she held a part-time job, but so expertly budgeted her time that she was able to fully participate in extracurricular activities and still graduate from high school early.

Judge Collins also worked throughout her undergraduate years at the University of Florida, where she majored in Economics. At UF, Judge Collins was a campus leader and was selected for membership in the prestigious Florida Blue Key student honor and service society. During her senior year, this overachiever broke her femur in a skiing accident, causing her to miss a month of school, and to be on crutches for a year. During that time of reflection, she decided to become a lawyer, took the LSAT, and was accepted into the University of Florida College of Law. (This judge bleeds orange and blue). Judge Collins’

many work experiences taught her the value of hard work, and provided her with an understanding of how many different types of people work and live, which is particularly helpful dealing with *pro se* litigants in county court.

At UF Law, Judge Collins was an outstanding member of the Trial Team, even as she worked part-time. She had a personal homecoming of sorts, when she traveled back to Miami-Dade County to argue in the state Trial Team finals at the Miami-Dade County Courthouse, where her father beamed with pride as he observed her in the competition. Sadly, Judge Collins' beloved father, who taught her so much, passed away shortly after her law-school graduation. Her mother is alive and well, though, enjoying her daughter's many successes.

In the summers between law school semesters, Judge Collins completed unpaid internships at the Dade (now Miami-Dade) County State Attorney's Office under the leadership of Janet Reno. During her first summer, she was paired with a female homicide prosecutor, which gave her a happy epiphany: she wanted to be a prosecutor! A more sobering epiphany came as a result of Operation Court Broom, a probe of judicial corruption in Miami that led to the convictions of three judges, a former judge and six lawyers. Judge Collins states that Operation Court Broom made her realize how critical it is for litigants and judges to conduct themselves with the utmost integrity at all times.

Upon graduating from law school, Judge Collins was hoping to join the Miami-Dade County State Attorney's office, but, unfortunately, that office was then under a hiring freeze. However, the State Attorney's Office in the 16<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit in Monroe County had an opening, and Judge Collins seized upon it. She landed a position in the prosecutor's office in Plantation Key, prosecuting misdemeanors, and eventually felonies, in the upper Keys. After two years, Judge Collins was transferred to the Marathon Key office, where she prosecuted felonies for six years. Thereafter, she returned to Plantation Key, where, for the next four years she prosecuted a variety of felonies, including DUI manslaughter.

Judge Collins' stint in the Keys turned out to be a most fortunate turn of events, because that is where she met her husband, Chuck Collins. Like many prosecutors, Judge Collins used to "ride shift" with different law enforcement agencies. One day, she was called to "ride shift" with Chuck, a marine homicide investigator, with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. After riding shift with Chuck to investigate a serious boating accident, Judge Collins and Chuck became friends. Their friendship blossomed into romance, and after three years of dating, they married in Miami.

In 2004, Chuck earned his MBA degree in Crisis Management and Business, and was promoted to the position of Regional Director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Consequently, the Collins family relocated to Palm Beach County, with their two children, Rachel and Ryan, then, respectively, ages five and six. Judge Ted Booras, then

Chief Assistant State Attorney for the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit, knew Judge Collins, knew she would be a great asset to this Palm Beach County State Attorney's office, and immediately hired her.

Judge Collins prosecuted misdemeanors and felonies in the 15<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit from 2004 until her appointment to the bench. During that time she developed a reputation as a tenacious and tireless litigator, dedicated to the pursuit of justice. She also demonstrated an inquisitive mind, an almost encyclopedic knowledge of criminal and evidence law, and a great willingness to mentor and nurture young prosecutors, who often lined up outside her office seeking her assistance on their cases. Ultimately, in addition to prosecuting her own cases, Judge Collins was appointed the Director of Training and Legal Education for the State Attorney's Office. In April, 2016, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission named her "Prosecutor of the Year," for her tireless work teaching law enforcement officials throughout the State of Florida, and beyond.

Judge Collins' public service extends to other areas as well: for many years she was a Girl Scout leader and a merit badge counselor for the Boy Scouts. In addition, she served as a Captain for Project Graduation, a program put on for high-schoolers on graduation night, as an alternative to alcohol and drug-fueled activities.

During her career as a prosecutor, Judge Collins handled many high-profile cases and many smaller cases that did not make the headlines, but were life-changing for ordinary people and their families. Many victims and their families appreciated the care and compassion Judge Collins showed them as she prosecuted their cases, and even after the cases were over. Several victims and their families attended Judge Collins' investiture—a testament of appreciation for Judge Collins' hard work and sense of humanity.

As to high-profile cases, Judge Collins may be best known as a member of the team of prosecutors who successfully prosecuted Wellington Polo mogul John Goodman for the DUI manslaughter of 23-year-old Scott Wilson, who died in 2010. After Goodman's conviction was overturned due to jury misconduct, Judge Collins was part of the team that retried Goodman in 2014. Both of those trials were evidence intense, and often required Judge Collins to respond to numerous motions before the court on very short notice. She expertly and ethically handled the matters presented to her, and the team won another conviction

Two and a-half years ago Chuck retired from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. He is now Executive Director of the Marine Industries Association, which hosts the annual Palm Beach International Boat Show. Rachel, now age 19, is a student at the University of Florida, diligently working towards dual degrees in Business and International Studies. Ryan, who is autistic, is now 21, recently completed a life skills program, and is also doing well.

Judge Collins immensely enjoys serving on the bench. She learns new things each day from her colleagues on the bench, members of the bar, and the litigants appearing before her. In her leisure time, she enjoys cooking, traveling, and seeing Broadway shows. She is a voracious reader, who belongs to six libraries, sometimes reading up to three books each week. Clearly, she remains an overachiever.

Although ultra-prepared, organized, and the consummate professional, Judge Collins has a delightful, dry sense of humor and a wonderful ability to make people feel comfortable around her. These, along with her other fine qualities, make her a wonderful addition to our Palm Beach County bench. Her Dad would certainly be proud!

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