

Judge Melanie Surber --- by Laura Starr --- June 2020 PBCBA Bulletin

Appointed to the county bench in December 2019, Judge Melanie Surber considers herself fortunate and literally pinches herself every day - she loves her job and looks forward to serving the community.

Judge Surber was born and raised in Farmingville, New York. Upon graduation from high school in New York she received an academic scholarship to Boston University where she graduated with a Bachelor's degree in History. During college, Judge Surber tutored children at the local community center. After completing college, Judge Surber followed her family who had relocated to South Florida. It was her father, a big influence in her life, that suggested she take the LSATs and attend law school. Judge Surber took his advice and was immediately accepted into Nova Southeastern School of Law, which was close to her parents' home. She loved Nova because it was the first small school she had ever attended. At Nova, Judge Surber excelled and became President of the Public Interest Law Society. It was through a clinic offered by Nova that she gained experience working with the Attorney General's office in its Children's Legal Rights section handling dependency and termination of parental rights. Upon graduation from Nova in 1997, Judge Surber worked briefly in the private sector handling landlord-tenant, credit card, and debt collection cases before turning her attention to public service. Due to the clinic she took at Nova, Judge Surber knew she wanted to work at the Attorney General's office but they were not hiring new lawyers at the time. Even so, she applied for an open law clerk position with the Criminal Appeals Division in West Palm Beach. It was then that she met one of her mentor's, Cele Terenzio, who instead offered her a position as a junior lawyer. For the next twenty years, Judge Surber fulfilled numerous roles, working in Criminal Appeals, she was given the opportunity to work on Jimmy Ryce Appeals, Capital Appeals, was a mentor to young lawyers, and was eventually promoted to the position of Senior Attorney. Judge Surber has been to the Supreme Court of Florida on twenty cases – 8 death penalty cases and 12 criminal appeals. The most notable of her cases is work she performed on the Stand Your Ground Defense. However, Judge Surber's favorite appeals involve jury related issues.

When Judge Surber was hired at the Attorney General's office, Judge Bonavita mentored her. Judge Bonavita encouraged her to continue to apply for appointment to the bench. In one of life's coincidences, Judge Surber was assigned to take over the division vacated by Judge Bonavita who has transferred to the criminal division. The qualities that Judge Surber admires in other judges that she would like to emulate include being respectful to all parties, listening to everyone, being prepared, organized, staying calm, and exercising patience.

Judge Surber's favorite part of being a judge is connection to the community, meeting new people, and making a difference. Judge Surber's colleagues and mentors have rendered sage advice – “listen to everything, you may learn something” and “you will need patience.”

Judge Surber has resided in Delray Beach for the last 18 years with her real estate attorney husband who she met while studying for the bar exam. They have two daughters who are 13 and 10.

On behalf of the Judicial Relations Committee and Palm Beach County Bar Association, we welcome Judge Melanie Surber to the Bench and look forward to her dedicated service, commitment and contribution to the local bar and community at large in the 15th Judicial Circuit.