



JUDICIAL MERIT SELECTION COMMISSION
Sworn Statement to be included in Transcript of Public Hearings

**Family Court
(Incumbent)**

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1. Why do you want to serve another term as a Family Court judge?

I have a most empathetic nature, and I have always loved problem-solving. I believe I bring a unique gift of empathy and problem-solving to the bench in terms of putting litigants on a better path for themselves and their families. I have a most protective nature, especially when it comes to the vulnerable. I believe I provide the necessary protection to our State's children, vulnerable adults, private litigants, and those litigants involved in our State's DSS and DJJ agencies. I have a profound love of the rule of law and our legal system, and it has been the honor of my life to serve our State in the capacity of a Family Court judge. I have a strong work ethic, which is a definite requirement of this position in terms of personal sacrifice, focus, and due diligence to the cases and families who come before me.

I wish to serve another term as a Family Court judge because my nearly 18 years of experience on the Family Court bench provides a strong foundation of our Family Court judicial system, especially as judges retire and new judges are elected. I am the senior sitting judge in the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit, and I enjoy providing insight and guidance to my fellow judges. I enjoy my work, and I humbly believe the citizens of South Carolina, especially the vulnerable, benefit from my knowledge, experience, worth ethic, and profound concern for the safety, security, and dignity of all people.

2. Do you plan to serve your full term if re-elected?

I do plan to serve my full term if re-elected.

3. Do you have any plans to return to private practice one day?

I have no plans to return to private practice one day.

4. Have you met the statutory requirements for this position regarding age, residence, and years of practice?

I have met the statutory requirements for this position regarding age, residence, and years of practice.

5. What is your philosophy regarding *ex parte* communications? Are there circumstances under which you could envision *ex parte* communications being tolerated?

My philosophy regarding *ex parte* communications is consent with Canon 3(b)(7)(a-e). I believe this is one of the most important Canons to allow for a fair and impartial adjudication and the right to be heard by everyone who has an interest in the matter. I do not initiate, permit, or consider *ex parte* communications or other communicates made to me outside the presence of the parties concerning a pending or impending proceeding except where allowed upon the exceptions to this Canon. There are circumstances, as set forth in Canon 3(b) (7) (a-e), which allow for *ex parte* communications under certain circumstances and with protective measures and conditions in place. I allow *ex parte* communications necessary for scheduling, administrative purposes or emergencies that do not deal with substantive matters or issues on the merits, provided I believe that no one will gain a procedural or tactical advantage. I make provisions immediately to notify all parties of the communication and allow all parties the opportunity to be heard on the matter. If I need the advice of an expert, who, of course, has no interest in the pending litigation, I will seek his advice, giving notice to all parties of his identity and his advice, and giving all parties an opportunity to respond. In Family Court, there are often requests for *ex parte* temporary restraining orders and temporary custody involving the safety of children. I make exceptions, as allowed by law, for these orders, while setting the matter on the docket on an emergency basis, thereby giving all litigants the right to be heard fully and completely on an expedited and immediate basis.

6. If you disclosed something that had the appearance of bias, but you believed it would not actually prejudice your impartiality, what deference would you give a party that requested your recusal? Would you grant such a motion?

I immediately would grant such a motion. The perception is what is important. I want all litigants to leave the courtroom with the feeling that they have been heard by an impartial judge. Litigants may not like the ruling, but a ruling that feels partially handed down is intolerable in my opinion, and no litigant should have to live with such a ruling. I believe such a ruling undermines the confidence that litigants have in our system of justice, which we must protect at all costs.

7. How do you handle the appearance of impropriety because of the financial or social involvement of your spouse or a close relative?

My husband formerly owned and operated 2 restaurants in Greenville, Spero's Pete's Original and Spero's Pete's Original *too!* Spero owned and operated these restaurants for more than 30 years, and Spero enjoys the friendship of many of his patrons and has an outstanding reputation in Greenville for being an approachable, caring person. He and I have always been extremely careful not to allow discussion of law-related matters to avoid the appearance of impropriety or to give anyone the wrong impression that being friends with Spero made any difference whatsoever in the outcome of any litigation.

These restaurants have closed and are no longer in business as Spero retired in August, 2014. As the years pass, these patron relationships have grown fewer and fewer; however, Spero and I are still extremely careful not to allow anyone to give a false impression of access to me in my capacity as a Family Court Judge through Spero.

Spero has commercial rental properties; and, of course, I do not adjudicate any matter whatsoever involving any of his tenants or partners.

8. What standards have you set for yourself regarding the acceptance of gifts or social hospitality?

My standards for gifts and social hospitality are consistent with Canon 4(D)(5)(a-i). I do not accept gifts and social hospitality that fall outside the scope of the exceptions outlined in (a-i). I married Spero Conits on December 7, 2007, a year after I was sworn in to the Family Court bench. We had a very small wedding and reception with only family and close friends. We did not have wedding showers. All wedding gifts received were well with exception (d) regarding special occasions. In December 2009, our daughter, Heather Elizabeth, was born. I did receive baby gifts from family and friends. All gifts were well without exception (d) regarding special occasions as well. In my opinion, ordinary social hospitality is appropriate if it is consistent with the social hospitality extended others (i.e., being invited to a holiday gathering). However, I do not believe it is appropriate for a judge to allow others to purchase dinner, beverages, lunch or other meals for the judge. I do not consider such purchases to be "ordinary social hospitality". I always make sure I have sufficient cash with me so that I am never in a situation where someone would have to purchase something for me. I recuse myself from adjudicating the matters of any litigant with whom I previously socialized or accepted gifts.

9. How would you handle a situation in which you became aware of misconduct or appearance of infirmity of a lawyer or of a fellow judge?

I handle these situations pursuant to Canon 3(D)(1-4). If I became aware of misconduct of an attorney or fellow judge, I would inform the appropriate authority (i.e., the authority responsible for initiation of disciplinary process). If I became aware of misconduct of an attorney, I would report it to the Commission for Lawyer Conduct. If I became aware of misconduct by a fellow judge, I would report it to the Commission on Judicial Conduct.

10. Have you engaged in any fund-raising activities with any social, community, or religious organizations? Please describe.

I formally served as the Recording Secretary and President for the St. George Greek Orthodox Cathedral Dance Troup Adelpia, in which my daughter participates as part of her religious and cultural education. There are luncheons, which the Board hosts in order to fund dance costumes and activities for the children. I have participated in these luncheons (setting up tables, utensils, donating food, servicing, clean-up, etc.). I have not solicited funds in any

manner whatsoever other than by participating in these luncheons without our church community. The Troupe also hosted a New Year's Eve dinner/dance in which I participated in the same manner, but in no event did I ever solicit funds in any manner whatsoever. Finally, I serve on the food line at the annual Greek Festival hosted by St. George Greek Orthodox Cathedral. I do not solicit funds, and my participation is limited to volunteering in food booths.

11. Do you have any business activities that you have remained involved with since your election to the bench?

I have no business activities since my election to the bench.

12. Since Family Court judges do not have law clerks, how do you handle the drafting of orders?

Typically, I ask the prevailing party's attorney to draft an order, giving the other attorney or party an opportunity to review and comment on the proposed order. If I have *pro se* litigants who are not skilled in the preparation of Family Court orders or do not have the appropriate form orders available to them, I prepare my own orders in these cases. If I have a particularly complex, difficult or highly contested matter, I prepare my own order to avoid unnecessary findings of fact, which inappropriately may prejudice a litigant in the future and to ensure that the spirit and intent of my order is preserved.

13. What methods do you use to ensure that you and your staff meet deadlines?

My office has a tickler system in place to make sure all orders are disposed of promptly, efficiently and fairly. My office prepares a Matters Under Advisement report to Court Administration each month, thereby ensuring all Orders have been signed and that no litigant is waiting on a ruling.

14. What specific actions or steps do you take to ensure that the guidelines of the guardian ad litem statutes are followed during the pendency of a case?

At the commencement of a private custody case before me, I make sure there is an appropriate order appointing a qualified guardian ad litem who has met the statutory requirements to serve in this capacity based upon the required affidavit. I find it better to allow the

attorneys to select a mutually agreeable guardian so that everyone commences a case believing they are dealing with an impartial, qualified guardian ad litem. If the attorneys are unable to agree, I will select a guardian ad litem and ensure the appropriate orders have been issued to empower the guardian ad litem to conduct a full and complete investigation.

I set the initial fee and fee cap at the commencement of the case as required by the statute.

During the pendency of the case, I ensure the guardian ad litem is present for all hearings, unless specific permission has been given otherwise. In addition, I entertain motions made by the guardian on behalf of his/her ward, to enforce the order appointment guardian ad litem if necessary, and to increase the fee cap if warranted.

At the conclusion of the case, I ensure there is a final guardian report and allow the guardian to participate in the final merits hearing, including the presentation of a case in chief and cross examining all witnesses.

15. What is your philosophy on “judicial activism,” and what effect should judges have in setting or promoting public policy?

I believe judges should be cautious in inadvertently public policy, especially in Family Court. I believe the matters in Family Court are so fact specific that the Family Court judge must not box herself in to an inflexible position by advocating one way or the other on issues of public policy. What is in the best interest of the litigants in one case may be harmful for the litigants in another case. On the other hand, I believe a Family Court judge is in a unique position to promote the established and stated public policy. For example, it is the stated and established public policy of this State to preserve and protect marriage. As a Family Court judge, I believe I have the duty to preserve and protect marriage where possible and to encourage divorce litigants to explore reconciliation, where possible.

16. Canon 4 allows a judge to engage in activities to improve the law, legal system, and administration of justice. What activities do you plan to undertake to further this improvement of the legal system?

I teach and attend seminars and continuing legal education classes to attorneys and related professionals as outlined in my complete

application. I host a law student to sit with me for a two-week period each summer to get court experience. I speak to high school and middle school students during Law Week and as invited. Formerly, I served as a presiding judge at the Carol N. New National Mock Trial Competition and have served as a judge at the S.C. Bar High School Mock Trial competition to encourage high school and college students interested in legal careers.

My former activities include serving as a Member of the South Carolina Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission and serving as Co-Chairman of the Self-Represented Litigant Sub-Committee. In addition, I had the honor of representing the State of South Carolina at the 2017 CCJ/COSCA Southern Regional Juvenile Justice Reform Summit in Nashville, Tennessee. I also formally served on the South Carolina Bar Guardian ad Litem Task Force.

My current activities include serving as Secretary/Treasurer of the South Carolina Conference of Family Court Judges, where I will be the Vice-President Elect for the upcoming year. I also piloted the South Carolina Supreme Court One Case One Judge Complex Litigation program dealing with complex DSS litigation. This program is a success and is being implemented in counties throughout the State to expediate complex child abuse and neglect cases as well as termination of parental rights cases.

17. Do you feel that the pressure of serving as a judge strains personal relationships (i.e. spouse, children, friends, or relatives)? How do you address this?

For 11 years, I was the single mother of my son, Capers Williamson, after the death of my husband, Tom Williamson. I had an extensive support network of family and friends to assist me in getting Capers to his activities and appointments. I limited my social life to care for Capers when I was not at work. I have now remarried, and my husband and I have a 14-year-old daughter, along with the children and grandchildren of our blended family. My husband is retired and actively involved as a co-primary caretaker of our daughter and home. I do not feel the pressure of serving as a judge strains relationships any more than any other working professional. I have worked full-time my entire adult life, and I have learned to balance personal responsibilities with professional obligations.

18. Are you involved in any active investments from which you derive additional income that might impair your appearance of impartiality?

I am not involved in any active investments from which I derive additional income that might impair my appearance of impartiality.

19. Would you hear a case where you or a member of your family held a *de minimis* financial interest in a party involved?

I would not hear a case in which I or my family member held even a *de minimis* financial interest in a party involved. To do so, in my opinion, creates the appearance of impropriety, which harms our entire judicial system.

20. Are you a member of any organization or association that, by policy or practice, prohibits or limits its membership on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin? If so, please identify the entity and explain if this organization practices invidious discrimination on any basis.

I am not a member of any such organization.

21. Have you met the mandatory minimum hours requirement for continuing legal education courses for the past reporting period?

I have met the mandatory minimum hour's requirements for continuing legal education courses.

22. What do you feel is the appropriate demeanor for a judge and when do these rules apply?

I feel a judge needs to be patient, dignified and courteous to everyone. I feel the judge needs a quiet, compassionate and interested demeanor. I believe a judge should maintain a formal and respectful demeanor. I feel the tone of a courtroom needs to be serious and quiet. Litigants need to feel that the judge, staff, and attorneys take the matter before the Court seriously. The courtroom is not a place to joke and make light of the facts and situations which bring litigants before the Court. I feel the judge needs to insist that the attorneys, litigants, court officials, staff and anyone else in the courtroom act in the same manner. I have learned during my years on the bench that a judge must sometimes be firm and take control of the courtroom. I have learned that a judge must adhere to the

scheduled docket, and require litigants to reschedule their cases if they failed to requested sufficient docket time in order to move the cases along and not keep other litigants and attorneys waiting.

These rules apply seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. I believe a Family Court judge should be seen by the community members as a serious, compassionate, patient, dignified and respectful person. I do not believe a judge can act one way during working hours and act in a totally different or inconsistent manner during non-working hours. A judge is a community member and at all times represents the integrity and dignity of the judicial system.

23. Do you feel that it is ever appropriate to be angry with a member of the public, especially with a criminal defendant? Is anger ever appropriate in dealing with attorneys or a pro se litigant?

I do not believe anger is ever appropriate with a member of the public, including criminal defendants. While I certainly have heard testimony and evidence involving inappropriate, criminal, and outrageous conduct, I believe the interest of justice can only be served by a judge who remains calm, collected and in control. The law affords remedies for inappropriate, criminal, and even outrageous conduct; and anger is not necessary or appropriate in any circumstance. Rulings issued out of anger can never be the best rulings. Many criminal defendants who appear before me are juveniles, and the role of the juvenile justice system and Family Court is to rehabilitate these young offenders. I believe by the time a young offender has gotten to me, there surely has been enough anger in his/her life without me adding to it. Anger never works with juveniles. Juvenile offenders need understanding and hope, not more anger. Other criminal defendants appearing before me are often those who have failed/refused to obey court orders, including child support payments. Anger is not appropriate or necessary to exact compliance. The law affords appropriate remedies for civil and criminal contempt, all of which can be imposed without anger. I do not believe anger is ever appropriate in dealing with attorneys, nor do I believe that anger is even necessary to carry out the duties of

this office. I most certainly do not believe anger is appropriate for *pro se* litigants, and I believe *pro se* litigants should be afforded the highest level of patience, courtesy and respect. Having been on the bench for a number of years, I do understand the need, at times, to be firm and in control of my courtroom. However, being firm does not require me to be angry or to act in an inappropriate or rude manner. The issues adjudicated in Family Court are of the most sensitive, personal, and intimate nature. Issues involving a person's children, money, and property are always sensitive. Sternness sometimes is necessary in order to maintain the appropriate atmosphere of respect, dignity, and professionalism.

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE ANSWERS TO THE ABOVE QUESTIONS ARE TRUE AND COMPLETE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE.

Sworn to before me this ____ day of _____, 2024.

(Signature)

(Print name)

Notary Public for South Carolina

My commission expires: _____