

Meet the new judge: Former prosecutor Jennifer Bass

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When Assistant State Attorney Janine Nixon moved to Marion County in 2005 she found a mentor in Jennifer Bass. Bass was a docket manager in the felony division, Nixon remembered, and so supervised Nixon as a docket attorney. And although Nixon wasn't new to the profession, having held the same title in Broward County, Bass managed to influence her work positively.

Take filing decisions, for example, when assistant state attorneys charge individuals with crimes.

Nixon remembered that Bass would push her to get more information, often interviews beyond a law enforcement officer's account, before filing a charge against someone. As Bass would point out at the time, an officer's or deputy's account -- while not unreliable or unfair -- tells just one side of the story.

"She always encouraged me to remember what I was doing: charging someone with a felony crime," Nixon said.

So when Bass called her this December to tell her that Gov. Rick Scott had appointed her as Marion County's newest circuit judge, Nixon said she was thrilled for her longtime friend and colleague. She hadn't known that Bass had long dreamed of being a judge, she said, but knew that the position was meant to be.

"She's just that kind of even-keeled, fair-minded person that you would think of when you think judge," Nixon said.

Bass, an alumna of the University of Florida's Levin College of Law who has spent most of her career at the local State Attorney's Office, made the formal transition to circuit judge on Jan. 1. She said she has spent much of the last month learning the ropes, spending a week at the first phase of the Florida Judicial College in Orlando and independently studying up on family law. This includes topics such as divorce, adoption, custody or time-sharing, domestic violence injunctions and more. She's also been in a courtroom, albeit in borrowed robes, to interact with the litigants now assigned to her through the many files she inherited from Circuit Judge Anthony Tatti.

Tatti this month replaced Circuit Judge Hale Stancil on the felony docket; Stancil's retirement at the end of December created the open judgeship that Scott selected Bass to fill.

"I certainly have a lot of work to do," Bass said, adding, "I'm very excited about



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Newly appointed Circuit Judge Jennifer Bass poses for a photo in her chambers at the Marion County Judicial Center in Ocala, Fla. on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2016. Bass was appointed to the 5th Judicial Circuit as a judge on Dec. 18, 2015 and her term started on Jan. 1, 2016. She started seeing cases on Jan. 11, she said. Bass did her undergraduate studies at the University of Florida and passed the bar after studying at UF Law School. She is married and has two daughters.

learning a new area of the law.”

Bass has dreamed of being a judge since she was a young girl, she said, and took the first step toward that goal when she became the first member of her family to attend college. A Gainesville native, she stayed local as she majored in history at UF and then enrolled in law school there.

Bass, who said she comes from a modest background, said she was drawn to a legal career in part out of appreciation for the opportunities she had been given.

“In this country individuals can change their circumstances if they’re willing to work hard,” she said. “So many of the opportunities that we have as citizens come from the foundation of our legal system and the rights that we have in this country.”

She connected with the State Attorney's Office in Marion County as an intern even before graduating law school in 1999 and stayed there to prosecute a wide variety of misdemeanor and felony cases for about 10 years. In 2008 she briefly left for a term as a law clerk with federal magistrate Gary R. Jones in U.S. District Court. She returned to the Marion County Judicial Center the following year, and most recently worked as the supervising attorney of County Court.

When Stancil last year announced his retirement, Bass said she considered whether that experience would enable her to be a quality judge. It would be the first time she put her name in for a judgeship, she said, and she wanted to be sure she would do well if chosen.

Her years as an assistant state attorney had given her valuable hands-on experience in the courtroom. And although her courtroom experience lay on a felony docket, and she knew the new judge would handle a family law docket, she said she had some familiarity with family law issues through overlap in her felony cases.

She was familiar with domestic violence injunctions, for example, since one incident can spark both a felony charge and an injunction.

Her stint in U.S. District Court had likewise been valuable in preparing her for a circuit judgeship, she said. This had tasked her, in part, with drafting memos, motions and orders. She said writing is important for a judge, but not emphasized among prosecutors.

“It’s a very different perspective than being a party or a lawyer,” she said of her time working for Jones. “It gave me an idea of what the viewpoint might be from where I am now.”

After consulting with colleagues and with her family, including 8- and 11-year-old daughters, she decided the timing was right to submit an application. The 5th Judicial Nominating Commission selected her as one of six candidates through a vetting process in October, and in December Scott made his announcement.

Brad King, state attorney for the 5th circuit and Bass’ longtime supervisor, said Scott made a good decision.

“She’s very bright. She works hard. She researches well to know the law,” he said, pointing specifically to the years she spent prosecuting cases that involved wiretaps. He recalled that she would regularly read up and what is and is not permissible in this area.

And her personality also makes her a good fit for a circuit judge, King said: polite, but firm enough to ensure that things are done correctly and orderly.

“Some judges will take the time to help lawyers develop,” he added. “She would be one that a new lawyer, after their case is over, could go to her and say, ‘Could you

critique me?”

Bass, for her part, said she has benefited from a vast pool of knowledge and experience already on the bench. She said she especially looks up to Circuit Judge Sue Robbins, who is the administrative judge for family law in the circuit, as setting a standard through her passion and work ethic.

And, she added, Robbins has a terrific sense of humor. (Nixon, Bass' longtime colleague, said the same of Bass.)

Although Marion County still has no minority judges, Bass' appointment notably brings the local judicial roster to one-third female. While Bass noted that her appointment also coincided with the first time that the Judicial College, which draws new judges all over Florida, had more female than male judges, she said she believed that quality matters more than diversity in a judge.

“I would expect the people of this circuit to want the most qualified person in the job, whether male or female,” she said. “As a practicing lawyer, I always wanted a judge who was hard-working, had integrity, was prepared and had a servant's heart. I think that's really important.”

King said he was disappointed to see Bass leave his office, but happy to see her in her new position.

“If good people are in a place where they have a bigger impact on the system,” he said, “then the system is better off.”

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