



Judicial Profile of Honorable Edward Rodgers
By Thomas A. Hoadley
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It was a slightly overcast day as we sat musing in Judge Rodger's office. He was very reflective. He is getting ready to retire. To get to the Judge's chambers on the eleventh floor, you need to push a red button. The glass door slides open, and you enter a corridor with offices looking toward the west. As he looked toward Clear Lake, he said, "There's a lot of Black history down there. The land in front of the Lake was swamp, and we had to move North and South. So you see the two-story building on Tamarind?" The Judge pointed the old Florida Bar. "That was where Cracker Johnson was killed. In the late 40's, Cracker was in charge of gambling and prostitution. He ran a poker parlor and Georgia Skins right there in that building." He mused further: "Did you know all those little houses all up and down Tamarind and Rosemary were doing Bolita?" (They are torn down now.) In the 50's, Sheriff Kirk's Black Deputies would cruise down Tamarind and Rosemary. They would pick up the Bolita money. After Cracker, there was John Henry Searles. Then Rob Horn. They died of natural causes. The Judge said: "Just west of the Florida Bar was where Gwendolyn's family lived." It is now a vacant lot.

The Judge's father had been leading a quiet existence in Alabama. They needed strikebreakers in Pittsburgh. The company gave him a ticket north. After the strike was over, he remained. I asked the Judge what his father did. "My father was the only Black Republican in Pittsburgh; he was still loyal to the memory of Lincoln." Because of this, he couldn't get a job. He could not get clearance from Democrat Ward Chairman. Young Ed told his father he wanted to be a lawyer. His father replied: "Forget it son, I got lawyers working with me on the WPA."

Eddie graduated from high school in Pittsburgh in 1944. He immediately volunteered for the Navy. He became a hospital corpsman in San Diego. Like many World War II Veterans, he went to Howard on the G.I. Bill. It was here that he met Gwendolyn. They were married during Ed's senior year; they moved to West Palm Beach. Ed took a job as a teacher at Roosevelt High School from 1950-1960. He became assistant school principal at night.

Ed decided to leave education, and go to law school. He was 33. In 1960, he heard that Florida A& M had opened a law school. Ed was the first class of six (along with Alcee Hastings.) He took the Bar Exam at the Dupont Plaza in 1963. He was not allowed to eat there; they ate at Howard Johnsons. They all passed. Ed went to work for Malcolm Cunningham; they opened a storefront office on Rosemary. His secretary, Dee

Daniels, earned \$30.00 a week. He wanted to be an Assistant County Solicitor. Joel Daves turned him down. Marvin Mounts was elected. He asked Ed to join him.

In 1967, he wanted to get back into private practice. He opened his office in the Pan Am Building. He became the first black lawyer working downtown.

In 1973, Gov. Reubin Askew appointed the first Black Judges in Florida, in Dade, Broward and Palm Beach County. Ed Rodgers was appointed to the County Court on his 45th birthday. In 1977, Gov. Askew elevated Judge Rodgers to the Circuit Court. He served as Chief Judge from 1984-1985. Judge Hall has described Judge Rodgers as receiving an award every two months or so. Judge Oftedal described his patience.

The over-riding most important thing that Judge Rodgers did, and what his most proud of, is the “Drug Court”, which works outside the criminal justice system.

There are Drug Courts in various counties, but to receive Court-ordered treatment, you must commit a crime. The novel approach followed by Judge Rodgers was to spend every Saturday in Riviera Beach, Delray Beach, or West Palm Beach issuing civil Court Orders for treatment to persons needing treatment. Judge Rodgers described the usual scenario. A troubled individual comes to one of the agencies providing beds and treatment. This person will be told to come back in six to eight weeks. Perhaps a bed might be available. Then the Judge stated: “that person is about two hours away from committing a crime.”

Because of this innovative program, the Judge was given the Jefferson Award in 1992. He was one of five who received this national award in the Supreme Court in Washington. There is a framed quotation that hangs in the Judge’s Chambers, and has for some time. It mirrors his life:

It can be said of him that he did not fear the weather and did not trim the sails, but instead, challenged the wind itself to improve its direction and to cause it to blow more kindly over the world and its people.