



Judge Matthew Stevenson

By: Thomas Hoadley

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The elder Stevenson was a Navy man, stationed at the Old Navy base in Key West. After he and Verdelle were married, they had two sons and two daughters; Matthew was born in 1953. After twenty-six years, Chief Petty Officer Stevenson retired to Opalocka, a modest bedroom community south of Miami.

Matthew had a very stable home life. His parents, of modest educational backgrounds, recognized the importance of education. Homework before television, study, and most important, books. Books expanded Matthew's mind; for Matthew, books "opened up a whole new world." There was a strong religious background, and the family emphasized respect for other people. A family of modest means, everyone worked. Matthew started at age fifteen, and worked steadily through high school, college, and law school; mowing lawns, washing dishes, selling shoes, working as a lifeguard and finally a school bus driver. Matthew did find time to play trombone in the Miami-Carroll City High School band. He loved football; he and his friends played most every afternoon while growing up.

Matthew knew that he would have to work his way through college. He applied for and was accepted at Florida State. Four years later, Matthew completed a double major in criminology and psychology. He had been a member of TKE and played in the FSU marching band. There had been a slow awakening to go to law school. This was a pivotal time in the civil rights movement. It was slowly understood that lawyers and courts were the means by which equality could be obtained. Matthew wanted to become part of this change. Remaining in Tallahassee, he entered law school at Florida State.

After graduation from law school in 1978, he signed on with Dick Joranby as an Assistant Public Defender. Then, he received a phone call from Florida Supreme Court Judge Hatchett, who asked him to be his law clerk. Judge Hatchett was elevated to the U.S. Fifth Circuit and took Matthew with him as a law Clerk.

At the end of his contract as a Law Clerk, Matthew decided to follow his family tradition; he joined the Navy, as JAG Officer. In the next five years, he tried and defended Courts-Martial cases. As the Staff Judge Advocate for an Admiral at the Jacksonville Naval Air Station he attended a nearby Baptist church. A member of the choir caught his attention. It seemed to Matthew she had more than singing ability. Dannette had graduated from college with a physics degree, and advanced studies in applied mathematics. They met, fell in love, and then married. (Matthew says she keeps the books.)

At the end of his JAG tour, he decided to accept a position as a Statewide Administrative Hearing Officer with the Division of Administrative Hearings in Tallahassee. He had done this type of work in the Navy. As a Hearing Officer he worked on cases involving doctors, hospitals, school boards and many other regulatory agencies.

In 1987 he came to South Florida to practice law. Matthew became a Mediator with Mediation, Inc., established by Jim Chaplin in Ft. Lauderdale and traveled the State conducting mediations. This was during the early start of the mediation program. In 1989, three Judgeships opened up. Matthew, having been a Public Defender, Supreme Court Judge Law Clerk, Administrative Hearing Officer, Naval JAG Officer, and mediator, felt qualified to apply for one of the Judgeships. The original pool of six candidates contained only 7 name for 3 positions, Governor Martinez requested that the JNC expand the list of candidates to nine (3 names for each position). Matthew's name was one of the two additional names and he was then selected by Governor Martinez to fill the Circuit Court seat as one of the Circuit Court Judges.

Starting in January 1990, he took over Judge Wennet's civil division, and served for three years; then in the Juvenile Division for one year. He singles out Palm Beach County Trial Lawyers for praise, stating that we have worked extremely competent, hard working lawyers trying cases, which makes it relatively easy for Judges."

He then made three applications to become an Appellate Judge. The first time he was not on the list; the second time he was on the list; and the third time he got the appointment.

Judge Stevenson has not neglected his family life. He has two daughters, ages 7 and 18, and a son 9. He is an active member of Northwood Baptist Church. From September to November, on Friday nights, you will find the Judge running across the field as a referee in high school football games. It is his favorite sport. A friend invited him to a meeting of the Referee's Association, and it became his avocation. This is in addition to coaching a Little League football team at Lake Lytal Park.

Judge Stevenson, in a recent newspaper article, realized he would be an inspiration for black youth. He said "Every person can dream dreams and sometimes with hard work they can come true."