

# Judge Debra Moses Stephens

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by Yvette Trelles

She speaks with ease and grace. She is smart, warm and full of life. She is one of our newest County Court Judges, Judge Debra Moses Stephens. When asked how she likes being on the bench, Judge Stephens responds, "it's scary!". She welcomes the challenge with a smile on her face but says it is more difficult because of her love for her family at home. Judge Stephens further states she feels fortunate to have Judge Maass by her side as a mentor. While Judge Stephens feels no different and believes she has not changed since she has become a judge, she is amazed at how people react differently around her now that she is on the bench rather than just a lawyer.

Judge Stephens was born and raised in Washington, D.C. to Kathleen and Bernard Moses, Jr. Her parents still live there and they visit each other frequently. Judge Stephens has one sister who also lives in Washington, D.C. Currently, her sister works for the Department of Defense. Judge Stephens attended Duke University for her undergraduate degree and then attended Howard University School of Law.

Why law school? Well, actually Judge Stephens wanted to be a doctor. However, math was not her favorite subject and, therefore, she majored in English. She also took as many divinity courses as possible in college. Although she had no practical experience with the law, she says she was great at running her mouth! Therefore, law school was a logical progression in her life. She knew early on that she wanted to do criminal defense work because her passion was in the courtroom concentrating on trial work.

Following law school, she was offered a job with the Environmental Protection Agency in Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter, Judge Stephens was interviewed by the Public Defender's Office in West Palm Beach. It just so happened she interviewed in February, where of course, the sun was brightly shining and it was blistering cold in Philadelphia. The warm weather captured her heart immediately and she accepted a position with the Public Defender's Office in 1987. She only intended to stay for a short time but soon thereafter met her husband, Don Stephens, whose whole family was in Florida and the rest as they say is "history".

While she misses her family in Washington, D.C. deeply, Florida is certainly now her home. Her immediate family consists of her husband, Don Stephens, a well-known lawyer in town who practices at Olds & Stephens. He concentrates on civil rights cases as well as defending police officers, municipalities and personal injury. Judge Stephens and her husband have

three children; Don, 9 years old; Asha, 7 ; and little Noah, 2 years old. When she speaks of her children, her eyes light up. It is clear she is very much in love with her children. She quickly states how she feels blessed to have such a wonderful family. When Judge Stephens is not busy on the bench or reading case law, she is often seen at Girl Scout projects, basketball or soccer games, the violin lessons, the piano lessons, the ballet lessons...with three children how does she find time to do anything else?

Judge Stephens finds one of the most difficult things about sitting on the bench is making sure not to favor either side. Because there are so many pro-se litigants including the criminal defendants, she wants to make sure she is careful in weighing both sides equally and is very conscientious that the parties in the courtroom do not see any bias one way or the other. Judge Stephens says the pressures of judgeship are different than as a lawyer but has enjoyed her time thus far on the bench immensely.

Judge Stephens has been the Administrative Judge for County Court Criminal Division for 1 year. She is on the Judicial Oversight Committee for Traffic Adjudication Hearing Officers and the Palm Beach County Criminal Justice Commission Court System Task Force , where they are working on establishing a Mediation Program for Restitution in criminal cases. She was recently placed on the Board of Directors for the Conference of County Court Judges as a Circuit Representative for the county court judges in the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit and was appointed to the position when Judge Stern was elevated to the Circuit Bench. Judge Stephens also enjoys occasionally speaking to youth groups.

While Judge Stephens is quickly becoming comfortable sitting as a judge in the criminal arena, she says she is looking forward to the civil county court and is ready for the new challenge!

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