

Judge Sarah Willis

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By: William B. Lewis

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Judge Sarah Willis' career has been defined by a deep-rooted commitment to public service. First as a special victims unit (SVU) prosecutor and then as a magistrate, Judge Willis has worked to promote the cause of justice in the Palm Beach County community. Now, as a recently elected Circuit Court judge, she continues that mission.

The youngest child of a dentist and a doctor, Judge Willis has wanted to be a lawyer for as long as she can remember. After graduating from high school in Gainesville, Judge Willis attended Florida Atlantic University on a full scholarship. Upon graduating from FAU with a major in Fine Arts, Judge Willis enrolled at the Florida State University College of Law.

In her initial semester of law school, Judge Willis was first exposed to the realities of domestic violence through her criminal law course. Then, after her 2L year, Judge Willis worked as a Certified Legal Intern in the Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office. During her internship, she had the opportunity to try 10 cases – an experience that further cemented her interest in public service.

Upon completing her internship, Judge Willis accepted a full time position as an Assistant State Attorney in Palm Beach County and graduated law school in just two and a half years. Judge Willis quickly moved up the ranks in the office, tried dozens of cases, and was promoted to the SVU. It was here, helping victims of sexual assault and abuse, that Judge Willis found her true passion.

As she reflects on her time at the State Attorney's Office, Judge Willis mentions a teddy bear that sits on a shelf in her chambers. The toy was a gift from the victims of a case involving the sexual abuse of four siblings, the youngest of whom was only five years old, by their uncle. Judge Willis recalls how the victims struggled to understand the judicial process and the heartbreaking conversations she had when the victims questioned whether they had done something wrong. Ultimately, after much hard work, Judge Willis secured guilty verdicts and a life sentence against the perpetrator. It takes a special kind of person to have the compassion to connect with the victims of such horrific crimes, yet also the strength and skill to prosecute the abuser.

Due to her success in the SVU, Judge Willis received the opportunity to join the Statewide Prosecutor's Office of the Attorney General. As a Statewide Prosecutor, Judge Willis continued her efforts to protect the vulnerable in our society through the office's initiative to

combat human trafficking. While she thoroughly enjoyed this meaningful work, by this point in her career, Judge Willis knew that she eventually wanted to join the judiciary.

In 2014, Judge Willis took a step towards her goal when a magistrate position opened up in Palm Beach County. Judge Willis applied and was selected for the role by the Chief Judge of the Circuit. As a magistrate, Judge Willis worked mainly on family cases, an experience that she believes has been invaluable in her transition to the Circuit Court bench.

Judge Willis served as a magistrate from 2014 until 2018, but she continued to aspire to become a judge. So when a Circuit Court seat opened up in 2018, she knew she had to pursue the opportunity. After discussing the details with her family, Judge Willis made the decision to run for the open position, which required her to resign from the magistrate role that she loved.

As she looks back now on the contested judicial race, Judge Willis credits her husband, Albert, and her parents, for believing in her and dedicating much of their time to helping the campaign. And with two young children at home – seven-year-old Gabrielle and two-year-old Aedan – it was clearly a tall task for Judge Willis and her husband to balance the campaign with their other responsibilities. But all of their hard work paid off, and on January 8, 2019, Judge Willis received her commission as a Circuit Court Judge.

Judge Willis is currently assigned to the Family and Probate division. It is clear from speaking with Judge Willis that she truly enjoys her new role. But as much as she appreciates being a judge, the citizens and members of the bar in Palm Beach County should be just as appreciative to have Judge Willis on the bench. They elected a judge who cares about people, loves being in the courtroom, and wants to make a positive difference in her community.

As she looks forward to serving the community, Judge Willis hopes to apply her considerable experience as a trial lawyer and magistrate to ensure that all litigants are treated fairly and respectfully. We congratulate Judge Willis on her election and welcome her to the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit bench.

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