



Judge Pamela Reeves

First woman president of the Tennessee Bar Association, former chair of the Knoxville Election Commission, recipient of the Knoxville Bar Association's Governor's Award—and now the first woman to serve as a United States District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Tennessee.

PAMELA REEVES is intelligent and quick-witted, a luminary of the legal system—indeed, a real “Benchmark Dolly” for Knoxville. Since 1979, when she began her general civil practice in Knoxville at Griffin, Burkhalter, Cooper, and Reeves, the accolades, activities, and affiliations have accumulated. She rose to partner at Watson, Hollow, and Reeves in 1988 and later served as a partner from 2002 through 2014 at Reeves, Herbert, and Anderson where she was known for her work in matters of mediation, arbitration, and employment. She was the first female president of the American College of Civil Trial Mediators and she is currently the chair of the Tennessee Bar Foundation. She was confirmed by the U.S. Senate and sworn into office as United States District Court Judge for Eastern Tennessee on March 10, 2014. Here, Angelique Medow and Reeves discuss Reeves' humble beginnings, women in the judiciary, and the current state of law in the United States.

ANGELIQUE MEDOW: How does a day look in the life of Judge Pamela Reeves?

PAMELA REEVES: The start of my day is a cup of hot tea as I watch the river. I water my plants and fill my hummingbird feeders—about which, by the way, I am rather obsessive. Then I go to work, where a great deal of every federal judge's time is taken up with hearings on criminal matters.

AM: What is your role as a United States District Judge?

PR: My role as judge is to make decisions if parties cannot resolve their own difficulties and to apply the law to the situation at hand. My goal is to decide cases fairly and impartially and to be fair and patient, hard-working, and understanding.

AM: You have been practicing law since 1979. How has the judicial landscape changed over the past 35 years?

PR: The ability of corporations or wealthy individuals to contribute unlim-

ited amounts of money to, in effect, buy judges, has dramatically changed the judicial landscape in state elections.

AM: What are some of the most difficult challenges you face as a judge?

PR: My biggest challenge thus far is just trying to figure out where all of the 200 plus cases I have been assigned stand procedurally and substantively.

AM: Why has America become a more litigious society than it was two or three decades ago?

PR: First, the internet. Everyone can do their own research, has become an “expert,” and thinks that their cases are more promising than they really are. Second, in 1977, based on First Amendment rights, the Supreme Court ruled that lawyers could advertise.

AM: You've written columns for publication about the law for many years. What would you like people to know about the federal court system?



Let Us Be “You” When You Simply Cannot



PR: I would like people to understand that the federal judiciary is the third branch of our government—equal to the executive and the legislative branch. The framers of the Constitution knew the importance of having checks and balances and carefully structured the government to allow three separate and equal branches of government. The executive branch sets policy and administers the day-to-day operations of the government, the legislative branch makes the laws, and the judicial branch sees that the constitutional rights of citizens are protected and that the statutes are fairly applied.

AM: From your humble beginning in the mountains of Virginia, by a creek that supplied your family with water, you now sit atop one of the highest judicial perches in the United States. Why did you get involved with the court system and not something else?

PR: Two things happened: While in law school, I followed the Little Tennessee River snail darter controversy all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, including going to the hearing in Washington, D.C. Shortly after I graduated from law school, I had a sex-discrimination case in federal court. I realized how challenging and fun federal cases could be, and that such cases involved constitutional issues such as the First Amendment, due process, excessive force, and so on.

AM: What advice would you give to a young person with the desire to work in the legal system?

PR: The legal profession is not static; you must adapt to change. Find and develop an area of expertise.

AM: You were the first of four in your family to graduate from college. Your parents were not educated but were also not afraid to encourage you in every way they could. What inspired them to not be afraid?

PR: My dad worked second shift in sheet metal factories. My mother worried every day about how to feed her five children. I think they wanted more than anything for their children to have better lives—so they were willing to let us go to college in the hopes our lives would be better.

AM: How has the outlook changed over the years for women of and in the judicial system?

PR: Women have made huge progress in the judiciary. We have gone from no women on the U.S. Supreme Court to three women. We have gone from no women to four women on the Tennessee Supreme Court. There are still barriers, but there has definitely been progress.

AM: What advice would you share with professional women regarding professional relationships?

PR: Be realistic in expectations. For example, if you work in a courtroom, you can't be at soccer practice. Choose your priorities and don't whine that you can't do something else. Don't do too much and not do any of it well. I was lucky—I had a full-time babysitter.

AM: What's your favorite lunch spot?

PR: Chandler's. Fried chicken, okra, meat-and-potatoes—everybody loves Chandler's!

Angelique Medow is a 2012 Cityview Entrepreneur and the Principal of Building Ideas, which provides design, decorating, consultation, and project management for commercial and residential properties. She also enjoys exercising her degree in journalism from Arizona State University.

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