



A REPORT TO MEMBERS OF  
THE SOUTH CAROLINA BAR  
YOUNG LAWYERS DIVISION

## Road to a Judgeship: How Young Lawyers Can Pursue a Career on the Bench

By Wesley A. Vorberger

Serving as a judge is one of the greatest privileges in the legal profession—one few lawyers ever attain. However, becoming a judge is not altogether impossible. Indeed, if one begins their legal career with the end in mind, serving on the bench can be a realistic and achievable goal. Judges in South Carolina are elected by the General Assembly, and as a part of that election process, they must be screened and qualified by the Judicial Merit Selection Commission.

The Commission is mandated by law to review the qualifications of each candidate and conduct a thorough investigation into their background. After completing its evaluation, the Commission nominates candidates to the General Assembly for a vote. For many young lawyers, the idea of running for a judgeship seems daunting. To that end, below several common questions will be answered in an effort to provide some clarity to the judicial selection process.

### **What can a young lawyer do to build an appealing resume for a judgeship?**

Obviously, great legal experience is essential. The Commission's application process shows that well-rounded legal backgrounds are the most desirable. The Commission's Personal Data Questionnaire ("PDQ"), which is part of the application process, can serve as a great checklist for aspiring young lawyers. The PDQ asks numerous questions about the applicant's legal experience and will quickly reveal if there are any holes in one's resume. For instance, in seeking a Circuit Court judgeship, it is essential to have experience in both criminal and civil litigation, with as much exposure to trial work as possible. Government positions (federal/state/county) are excellent ways to gain that quality experience.



If you are already established as a civil litigator, volunteer with the Attorney General's Office or do some pro bono criminal defense work as a second chair. Seek balance in your resume. Another way to gain experience is to attend CLEs in areas where you lack exposure. In short, work on having a well-rounded resume that demonstrates competence in the courtroom.

### **What pitfalls should young lawyers avoid if they want to become a judge?**

There are two main potholes on the road to a judgeship: (1) character and fitness issues; and (2) serious financial issues. At the outset, if you have been charged with criminal matter (*e.g.*, DUI, *etc.*), do what you can to have it expunged from your record. Also, know that your reputation among the bench and bar, as well as the broader community you serve in, is highly important. While Ballot Box surveys are anonymous, patterns of questionable

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conduct are certainly going to raise eyebrows at the Commission.

Another critical aspect to your background and application is your financial position. As the Commission's evaluative criterion of Character states: "The commission believes that financial responsibility demonstrates self-discipline and the ability to withstand pressures that might compromise independence and impartiality. The commission will therefore look for evidence of a troubled financial status such as tax liens, unsatisfied judgments, a poor credit rating, or bankruptcy proceedings." In plain English: pay down your student loan debt and make sure you have a positive net worth. Although it is possible that some allowances may be made for student loan debts, it is nonetheless well-established that a positive net worth is essential in the eyes of the Commission.

#### ***What role does networking play in seeking a judgeship?***

Building a network in preparation for the judicial selection process specifically should really be no different than building your network as a young

lawyer generally. Make connections and seek out individuals with common interests. Specific to becoming a judge, cultivate strong relationships with your legislative delegation. This is one way to get any inside information as to potential vacancies and insights into the election process. On the eve of running, it would be wise to reach out to colleagues and judges who have been both successful and unsuccessful in their attempts to become a judge. Asking about their experiences will help yours go a lot smoother.

It is also important to note that once someone is officially a candidate, they are subject to the Judicial Canons. This means no political activity whatsoever. It is critical that a candidate become familiar, and maintain compliance, with the Canons. The same goes for procuring and soliciting votes in the General Assembly. A candidate should be familiar with Commission's rules as well as the statutory restrictions on these issues. Good examples can be found on the Commission's website in the form of past opinions addressing pledging prohibitions. It is also important to remember that no votes may be sought until 48 hours after the Commission's report on the candidates has been published.

#### ***When you're ready to run, how do you start the process?***

Start at the Commission's website. The Commission has a specific webpage that provides all of the relevant policies and procedures, manuals, current law, application documents, and checklists needed to run for a judgeship. See Running for a Judgeship – General Information, available at <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/JudicialMeritPage/RunningforJudgeshipGeneralInformation.php>. On the Commission's website you can also find information and transcripts from current and past screenings, sample documents, and the Rules of Commission, among other great resources.

Additionally, regardless of when you plan on running, you should review the Personal Data Questionnaire, referenced above, and be familiar with it. This is not a document that can be filled out quickly. When you do complete it, pay attention to each and every detail. While amendments

to the PDQ are allowed, if one turns in a rushed, incomplete document with typos and grammatical mistakes, both the initial document and the amendments will be included in the record. That is to say, there is no hiding from a less than polished first impression.

#### ***What does the Commission look at when vetting applicants?***

Candidates are evaluated on each of the nine listed evaluative criteria: constitutional qualifications or statutory requirements, ethical fitness, professional and academic ability, character, reputation, physical health, mental stability, experience, and judicial temperament. Further, in addition to the interview process, the Commission reviews each and every document provided by the candidate throughout the process in making its evaluations.

#### ***How long does the process take from start to finish?***

A media release announcing any judicial vacancies is typically issued by the Commission at the end of June (after which you have 30 days to apply). Judicial elections are usually held in the beginning of February the following year.

#### ***If you fail to get a judgeship the first time, what should you do next?***

Evaluate the questions asked at public hearings, especially on possible problem areas in your background. For example, if you have a lack of experience in a certain area, such as criminal law, make an effort to get some experience handling a criminal trial before you apply again. However, sometimes there are just several well-qualified candidates running for one seat, and while you may be found qualified, you might not be nominated by the Commission (the Commission can only nominate three candidates to the General Assembly for a single seat). Ultimately, there is no limit to how many times a candidate can run, and indeed, many have run more than once.

*Wesley Vorberger is General Counsel at the Greenville County Sheriff's Office. He has previously served as an Assistant Attorney General in the South Carolina Attorney General's Office as well as a federal district court law clerk.*



## **Stars of the Quarter**

**Elizabeth Neyle  
Taylor Gilliam  
Grady Anthony  
Mary Lee Briggs  
Erica Lybrand  
Grayson Lambert  
Alexis Blicht  
Caitlin Lee  
Cameodiamond Joseph  
Briggs Tucker  
Alicia Morris**

# Judicial Spotlights: Judges Pope, Price and Salvini



## Hon. Courtney Clyburn Pope

**Born:** November 26, 1979, Aiken, SC

**Education:** B.A., University of South Carolina, 2001; J.D., USC School of Law, 2007

**Career:** Before attending law school, Judge Clyburn Pope worked in public relations for a state agency. Upon graduation from USC's School of Law, she practiced workers' compensation defense for McAngus, Goudelock, and Courie, LLC. Judge Clyburn Pope relocated to Aiken, SC to establish a law practice with her then partner, Jason M. Price, Esq. where they practiced criminal law defense, family law, and immigration law. In 2016, Judge Clyburn Pope served as the Solicitor and City Attorney for the City of Aiken until her election to the bench on May 8, 2019.

**Family:** Married to George W. Pope III. Daughter, Lauren; Sons, CJ and George, IV.

### **Personal life away from the bench:**

My husband and I have three beautiful children. I enjoy watching my husband, who is a varsity basketball

coach and an assistant varsity football coach. We stay pleasantly busy watching our children during their various activities; wrestling, football, soccer, band, and all things space and NASA related. We are blessed to have our parents and close friends nearby and that enables us to spend cherished time with them.

### **What experience best prepared you for the bench?**

I would not say that one specific experience carried more weight in terms of preparation. The opportunity to have practiced several areas of law and have several mentors has had a tremendous impact on me. I began my law career practicing Workers Compensation. After opening my private practice, my partner and I practiced criminal defense, workers compensation, family law, immigration, as well as dog and horse litigation. My practice allowed me to venture into areas of law and gain meaningful experience. Most importantly, I believe that the wonderful attorneys and members of the judiciary who mentored me throughout the years were invaluable.

### **What is the best advice you can give to young lawyers?**

My advice to young attorneys is to treat others with respect and courtesy. Be civil and compassionate to your colleagues. Choose mentors that will invest in your growth and provide advice. Being open to always learning, no matter how versed in a subject you may be, is essential. Most importantly, no goal or achievement in your career is impossible.

### **What is the most rewarding aspect of being a judge, and the hardest part about being a judge?**

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a judge is the vast amount of information that you learn simply by hearing both sides of a case, whether it be criminal or civil. I am afforded the opportunity to hear from financial, medical, criminal, and many other types of experts in various areas. The information provided has

been both interesting and useful in my everyday life.

I believe the most difficult task of being a circuit court judge is the criminal sentencing. There is a delicate balance between balancing the interests of the victim, the state, and the defendant.

### **If you could choose one legal scholar to have dinner with, who would it be and why?**

I'd like to have dinner with Thurgood Marshall. I have always found his journey in the legal field to be extraordinary and monumental. His legal work helped to deconstruct Jim Crow segregation and his appointment as the first African-American Justice to the Supreme Court, a Court that he had argued to 32 times, was nothing short of historic. Admittedly, I'd love to lift weights with Ruth Bader Ginsberg!



## Hon. Bentley D. Price

**Born:** October 19, 1976

**Education:** B.A. Wofford 1999 and J.D. from Stetson University 2002

**Career:** I was an Assistant Solicitor, Ninth Judicial Circuit from 2002-2004. I was hired under a federal grant called the "Cease Fire Task Force" whereby I prosecuted major violent crimes, gun crimes, white collar crimes, and drug crimes. I was also the liaison to U.S. Attorney's Office for all gun related crimes. When I left the Prosecutor's Office I



went to the office of Query, Sautter, Price and Forsythe, 2004-2013. The firm is a general practice firm that handles complex criminal and civil cases with an entire sector also dedicated to domestic cases. I was the partner that oversaw the criminal and civil sector of the practice focusing on state court, federal court and magistrate courts. I worked hand in hand with the partners on all civil matters and we emphasized plaintiff's work in personal injury and both plaintiff and defense work in business litigation. I started my own practice, the Bentley Price Law Firm, LLC, in 2013 where I worked until I was elected to the bench.

**Family:** I am married, and I have one daughter and one son.

**What would the Bar be surprised to learn about you?**

The Bar would likely be surprised to learn that I was a four-year soccer letterman while at Wofford, and I am an excellent water skier.

**Personal life away from the bench:**

When I'm not working, I enjoy playing golf and spending time with my family and friends.

**What experience best prepared you for the Bench?**

My 12 years as a municipal judge on Folly Beach best prepared me for what to expect on the bench. I was appointed when I was 29 years old, and it allowed me to grow and mature as a judge.

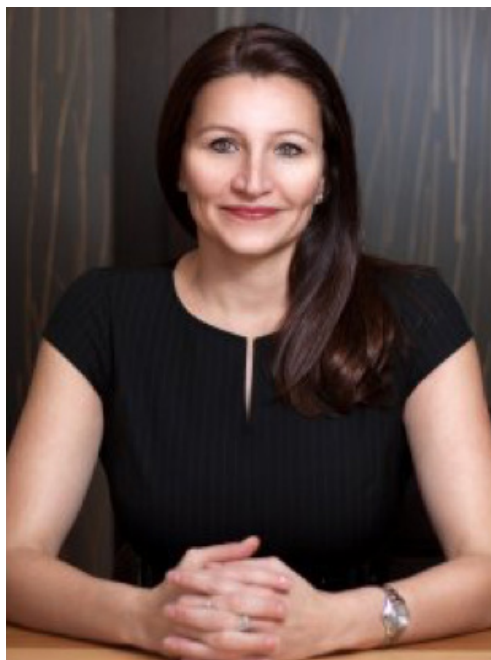
**What is the best advice you can give to young lawyers?**

My biggest advice to a young lawyer is to come to court prepared. It may seem like simple advice, but it is the most important advice I can give. We see a lot of people that are not prepared, and you don't want to gain that reputation.

**If you could choose one legal scholar to have dinner with, who would it be and why?**

Until last week, I would have said Judge Fields is the one legal scholar I would like to have dinner with. I

say until, because I actually was able to go to lunch with Judge Fields and my mentor Grady Query to celebrate his 99th birthday. He is an incredible person who overcame so much and has so many great stories, and it was an honor to get to sit with him and ask him questions about this job.



**Hon. Jessica Ann Salvini**

**Born:** 1975, Upland, California

**Education:** B.A., University of California Riverside, 1997; J.D., Golden Gate University School of Law, 2000

**Career:** After graduating from law school, Judge Salvini opened her own law firm in San Francisco, California, where she was also admitted to practice in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. She practiced in northern California for two years, focusing primarily on litigation in the civil, family and criminal courts.

Judge Salvini was admitted to the South Carolina Bar in 2001 and moved to South Carolina in 2002, where she was admitted to practice in the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina, as well as the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. She started a law firm and was senior partner from its inception until her

election to the Family Court Bench in 2019. Judge Salvini's practice continued to involve litigation in the civil, family and criminal courts. In addition to her practice, Judge Salvini was appointed to serve as an Associate Municipal Court Judge for the City of Mauldin in 2007 and became the Chief Trial Judge for the City of Mauldin in 2009.

**Personal life away from the bench:**

I have always been dedicated and consumed by the practice of law. When I am not on the bench or reading Advance Sheets, I spend my free time with family, friends and my Great Dane, Ruby. It is important to me to spend quality time with the people I care about and love.

**What experience best prepared you for the bench?**

My years of experience serving as a Municipal Court Judge for the City of Mauldin best prepared me for the bench. I was very fortunate to have the Honorable Robin B. Stilwell (who was the Chief Trial Judge for the City of Mauldin at that time) as my mentor. Under Judge Stilwell's tutelage, I learned how to maintain decorum in the courtroom, handle difficult pro se litigants, and make a clear court record.

Serving as the City of Mauldin's Chief Trial Judge after Judge Stilwell became a Circuit Court Judge, I presided over hundreds of criminal matters. In most instances those matters involved pro se litigants who were unfamiliar with the court system. Those years of experience on the bench taught me patience and how to effectively navigate court proceedings in a way that provides litigants with a forum to be heard while still maintaining the integrity of the judicial process.

**What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the South Carolina legal system?**

As our community continues to grow, so does the number of cases being filed in Family Court (and Circuit Court). Ensuring litigants are able to bring their cases before the

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## Judicial Spotlights

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Court in a timely manner is critical to maintaining the fairness of our legal system and the stability of our community. This is especially true in cases involving minor children, as their futures will most likely be determined by the outcome of the litigation and until such time as the litigants are able to have their cases heard, those children live in a state of uncertainty.

### What is the best advice you can give to young lawyers?

When I started practicing law, a seasoned attorney took me under his wing and gave me the following advice: Fight hard for your clients, be a zealous advocate, but never take the fight personally. When I was practicing law, I took this advice to heart, and it truly made a difference in my professional relationships with my colleagues. Regardless of how contentious the battle is, leave the fight in the courtroom or at the office. If you ever find yourself at your keyboard hammering away at an e-mail or letter to a colleague, litigant or client while steam is coming out of your ears or a litany of profanity is under your breath, wait at least 24 hours before you send it.

### If you could choose one legal scholar to have dinner with, who would it be and why?

For all the obvious reasons, I would like to have dinner with Abraham Lincoln. Not only was President Lincoln a brilliant man, he was a gifted storyteller and he liked to tell jokes. It is a gross understatement to say that his list of accomplishments are impressive. I would love to have the opportunity to listen to his stories about practicing law (especially how he successfully defended a criminal client charged with murder using an almanac), being President, ending slavery and reuniting the United States. And I wonder what jokes he might tell me.

# What's Been Happening



The **Wills Clinic Committee** held the first clinic of the year in Sumter and drafted 15 wills.



The **Professional Development Committee** hosted an event at Steel Hands.



The **Families Forever** Teddy Bear Drive was a huge success!



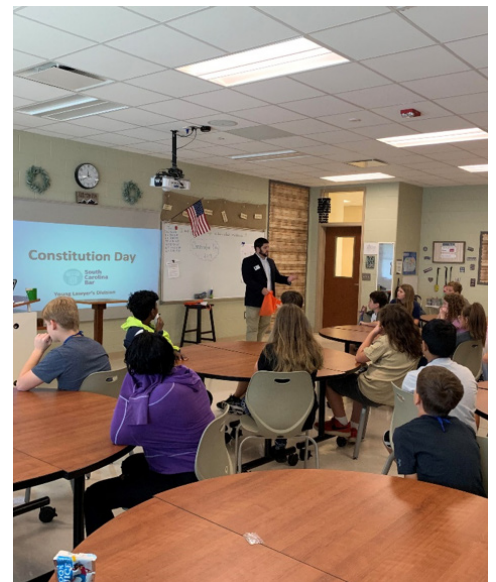
The **15<sup>th</sup> Circuit** hosted a New Admittee Happy Hour.



**Protecting Our Youth** hosted a panel at Summit Parkway Middle School.



YLD members received lessons from a golf pro at TopGolf in Columbia



Young Lawyers participated in **Constitution Day** at area schools.





# South Carolina Bar

Young Lawyers Division

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## Letter from the President

Dear Fellow Young Lawyers:

We have finished our first quarter of this Bar year! Yay! If your fall was like my fall, that “yay!” was more of relief than excitement. This was one of the busiest times in my career. The “imposter syndrome,” “did I pick the right career,” and generalized anxiety were at an all-time high—but, so were my billable hours. \*insert shoulder shrugging emoji\* And I wasn’t alone. I spoke with other young lawyers who were Just. So. Busy.

For more seasoned lawyers, these busy patches are undoubtedly easier to weather through the tests of time and experience. But, for young lawyers, this level of busy can be foreign and difficult to endure. In times like these, it’s important that we not only remember to take care of ourselves (mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally), but also taking a trip down memory lane to remember your “why” can be helpful.

I was recently treated to a front row seat to remembering my “why.” A few weeks ago, I attended the Swearing-In Ceremony for the newest crop



of SC lawyers. Watching the excitement and pride on their faces was so invigorating. Remembering that day that I signed the roll that every other South Carolina lawyer has signed. Repeating the oath that my colleagues have spoken. Remembering the excitement that can only come from achieving THE ultimate goal that we had worked for, seemingly since kindergarten. The anticipation of beginning my career. Remembering those basic feelings from that day were a fuel I did not know I needed. If this memory does not do

it for you, I challenge you to find that thing that does when you find yourself in a busy season.

I was not the only one busy this fall. Our Division was very busy and had some incredible activities. We had a very successful teddy bear drive from the Families Forever committee, the Voices Against Violence Committee formed an inaugural team in the Columbia Mayor’s Walk Against Domestic Violence, and we conducted a Habitat for Humanity Wills Clinic. We were in our local schools for Constitution Day, a Protecting Our Youth Panel and a Color of Justice Program. This is just a small sampling of our activities, and I know this next quarter will have more ways for you to impact your community and opportunities for personal and professional development.

Best regards,

Sheila M. Willis  
YLD President