

Sharon Franklin:

From Leading A Classroom To Leading A Courtroom

A passion for children and children's legal issues has been a lifelong compass for Sharon Franklin ('05), guiding her along a career journey from leading a classroom as a teacher to today leading a courtroom as a County Court judge. "I will always be passionate about children's legal issues," says Franklin. "The court system is daunting to adults, but it can be terrifying for children who have to become part of it."



Initially it was a deep interest in helping children – not the legal profession – that shaped Franklin's career. After earning a B.S. in English from Troy University, she returned to her hometown of Lakeland to become an English teacher. Yet, after several years of teaching at the high school level, Franklin began to feel that she could do even more by working in another capacity on behalf of children. So she took a job in the Department of Children and Families as an investigator of child welfare cases. After six months, she then joined the 10th Circuit's Guardian ad Litem program as a case manager.

Although several years later Franklin returned to teaching to better accommodate her own children's schedules, she continuously felt a tug pulling at her to help children in the legal arena. "I knew I wanted to prosecute child abuse cases," she says. "Those years of working on children's cases with Guardian ad Litem attorneys and going to court with them had really made an impression on me. That's what gave me the bug to go to law school."

Responding to that call, in the late 1990's Franklin enrolled at Barry University's new law school in Orlando because of its proximity. "With three young children and a husband with his own solo legal practice in Lakeland, I needed to be able to commute," she says.

Franklin quickly became adept at juggling her family obligations with the frequent commute. "When I began my law school odyssey, our children were 4 ½, 7 and 9," she recalls. "And they grew up with a mom constantly in school. I taught Monday to Friday in Lakeland, went to school in Orlando at night during the week and on Saturdays, and had Sundays for Mass and studying." Although Franklin transitioned from full-time teaching to substitute teaching after her first year of law school, she still had a packed calendar. "I really had to fine-tune my schedule so I didn't miss too many soccer games, swim meets or basketball games!"

At Barry, along with other students, Franklin participated in a memorable moment in the Law School's history ... the effort to obtain accreditation by the American Bar Association for the new law school. "All of us, professors and students, were involved in that joint venture," she remembers. "There was a lot of camaraderie and support as we all wanted to see Barry Law succeed."

When Franklin graduated in 2000, Barry Law was awaiting ABA accreditation so she took a position in the 10th Circuit State Attorney's Office. Several years later, Franklin returned to Barry to re-take the required credit hours in order to earn her J.D. in 2005 from the accredited Law School.

"Once again I merged work, school and family," she says. "Yet I was very blessed to be able to maintain my job at the State's Attorney's Office while returning to law school. And another positive for those of us who returned to the law school was the tremendous amount of moral support from Barry. As in the practice of law, it takes all parties to make the process work and succeed!"

During the next ten years, Franklin dove into her work for the State Attorney's Office; first as a misdemeanor and felony attorney, then as felony director and ultimately as chief of the Crimes Against Children unit. One of the things that resonated most strongly with her was assisting children caught up in the legal system, especially those who had been abused. "Kids who've endured abuse need to be carefully looked after throughout legal proceedings," she says. "You have to be in tune with them, prepare them and let them know you're there for them, so that no additional damage can occur throughout the process."

When a judicial vacancy opened on the 10th Circuit County Court in 2015, Franklin decided to express interest. After undergoing the interview process with a regional legal committee, she became a finalist whose name was forwarded to Tallahassee for the Governor's office to consider. A few weeks later, she was on the beach with her family at the start of the Memorial Day weekend when her phone rang. Franklin could not believe it was Governor Rick Scott on the line, offering her the appointment. After accepting and thanking the Governor, the call ended and Franklin took a moment to reflect before celebrating with her family. "I realized that there were many good candidates who would have been equally as prepared for the position. It was so humbling to know I was the one selected."

Franklin's initial County Court judgeship was in the criminal misdemeanor division. In 2016, she was required to run for election to retain her seat on the bench, however she was unopposed and earned her seat outright the day filing closed. Earlier this year she moved into the County Court's civil division.

Today, Franklin fully appreciates all aspects of being a judge. "I love working with the newer attorneys, primarily the public defenders and assistant state's attorneys," she says. "It's rewarding to see them flourish and progress in their careers." Franklin also knows firsthand about one particular facet of assuming a role on the bench. "The most challenging aspect of being a judge is going from being an advocate to absolute neutrality. It's imperative to remain neutral," she insists, even if a case involves children or pro se defendants.

Franklin's activities outside of work also have long reflected her passion for children. "I became involved in rebuilding our local Children's Home Society Board about 5 years ago," she says. "It is currently thriving and helping so many of our children to thrive, as well." However, when she assumed her judgeship she had to give up that work along with her activities on the Guardian ad Litem fundraising board. She remains active in the Lakeland Bar Association and the local Inn of Court, and is also involved in the executive committee of the Willson American Inn of Court.

Naturally, Franklin's strong passion for children encompasses her own. "My husband and I have been together since high school and we are most proud of successfully raising three amazing children," she says. Today, her daughter is an assistant state attorney and her two sons are in the restaurant business.

Looking back at all those years of juggling law school, work and family obligations helps Franklin appreciate the outcomes of that journey. "My schedule is so much easier now," she laughs. "I just enjoy any free time with my beautiful 2-year-old grandson!"

Reflecting on the distinct career path she selected, Franklin also has some advice for Barry Law students and alumni. "There are so many facets to the law," she says. "Find an area that interests you and draws you in, and follow it. The law is not about making money, social status or a job; it is a vehicle to help those in need."

And helping children in need truly has been a years-long passion for Franklin. She has made it her mission to always help her own children, the many students she taught in school and countless children caught up in the legal system. "There is nothing better than seeing children overcome whatever they've been through and knowing that you might have played a role in helping them," she says. "In doing so, I've been blessed as much as they have."