

Judicial Profile

JOAN P. BRADY

Hon. Jennifer Coffman Chief U.S. District Judge, Eastern District of Kentucky and U.S. District Judge, Western District of Kentucky

THE ARCHETYPAL SCALES of justice are an appropriate symbol for the balancing act performed by U.S. District Judge Jennifer Coffman, who sits in both the Eastern and Western Districts of Kentucky. If she were to be epitomized by a single word, that word might be “balance.” Her balance shows through in the smallest of things to the largest: in a love for chocolate moderated by healthy diet and exercise; in her teaching of others and in learning from them; in the unusual demands of her assignment to two district courts; and, above all, in exemplifying a meaningful work/life balance long before that phrase became popularized by the demands of modern law practice.

Judge Coffman was appointed to the federal bench by President Clinton in 1993—culminating her career in private practice and making her the first female federal jurist appointed in Kentucky. Kentucky is divided into two judicial districts, and Judge Coffman’s appointment was to both of them in an equal split, with the Eastern District of Kentucky designated as her home district. Only four of 678 active district judges have such roving assignments, and Judge Coffman is the only one who serves as chief judge of one of her districts, having been elevated to that position in the Eastern District of Kentucky in October 2007.

Described as “unassuming without fanfare” by a fellow jurist, Judge Coffman’s reserved demeanor masks a self-confessed “type A” personality. She commented more than once during our interview that her philosophy has always been to do “whatever it takes” to accomplish the task at hand—whether as chief judge of a busy district court, as a roving judge traveling endless hours between districts, or in her personal life as wife and mother.

Judge Coffman was born in 1948 and spent her earliest years on a farm in Woodland Mills, Tenn. Dem-



onstrating a keen intellect, she skipped the first grade and began her formal education in the second grade. When she was a sophomore in high school, her family moved from Tennessee to nearby Hickman, Ky., where her father took a position as president of a local bank. The future judge graduated first in her high school class but was not awarded the title of valedictorian because of a requirement that the valedictorian attend all four years in Fulton County schools.

After high school, Judge Coffman continued her education at the University of Kentucky. She enjoyed the liberal arts curriculum as an English major and particularly liked sports. Athletic in an era when women’s choices were more limited—though she disavows any remaining abilities—she joined the university’s cheerleading squad and became an avid fan of the school’s teams. In fact, her allegiance to the University of Kentucky stands alone as the one area of her life in which she has not necessarily lived by the adage of moderation in all things!

Despite Judge Coffman’s strong personal loyalty to

the University of Kentucky, family ties keep intact her innate sense of balance even when it comes to her beloved Wildcats. After a fateful basketball game against the University of Tennessee Volunteers in 1966 (the Wildcats won), she was introduced to Wes Coffman, a guard on the Tennessee team. The two began corresponding, then they began dating. They married soon after her graduation from college in 1969. The loyalty to their respective alma maters that both Coffmans feel continues to this day, as memorialized in a passage about their “mixed marriage” by Marvin West in *Tales of the Tennessee Vols*:

The orange cowboy hat belongs to Wes. Jennifer's hat is blue. The one atop the hat rack in their old Kentucky home signifies which team won the most recent game.

After her marriage, Judge Coffman moved to Texas, where her husband was in Army flight school at Fort Wolters. Like many during the Vietnam era, Judge Coffman followed her husband through his training from Texas to Savannah, Ga., to Newport News, Va. The couple returned home together to Lexington, Ky., only briefly before Wes departed for Southeast Asia. Never one to dwell on life's difficulties, Judge Coffman seized the opportunity to enter graduate school, from which she received a master's degree in library science in May 1971, just before her husband's return in June of that year.

His return meant another move—this time to Fort Eustis, Va. Exhibiting her customary can-do attitude, the newly minted librarian secured a position in the local library as a reference librarian. When her husband completed his military tour three years later, the couple returned to Kentucky, where Wes entered the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry and Judge Coffman accepted a position as a reference librarian at her alma mater.

One of Judge Coffman's most defining traits is her eagerness both to learn and to teach in equal measures. That trait probably contributed to her first career choice as a reference librarian, but it also led her to a new challenge at the University of Kentucky. Encouraged by the head of the university library, Paul Willis, who also had his J.D., Judge Coffman took the LSAT in fall 1975. She found the experience exhilarating, remarking that never before in her life had she enjoyed taking an academic exam so much. She was accepted as one of only four students admitted in midyear and became a full-time law student at the University of Kentucky Law School in January 1976.

During law school, she clerked for a local attorney, then joined his practice upon her graduation two and a half years later—in 1978. As a lawyer in a small firm, she initially enjoyed a general practice but slowly began to focus on employment law. Because of her specialty, she soon found herself in demand by employees as well as employers.

During those years, Judge Coffman learned to balance growing personal and professional responsibilities. Her husband's dental practice was thriving, and she had become the mother of two children (Will in 1980, and Blair in 1984). Like most working professionals, the Coffmans hired domestic help and cobbled things together as needed. She made conscious decisions to avoid serving on committees that would involve evening meetings and admits that her social life became a luxury in which she rarely indulged. Although many certificates and awards fill her office, Judge Coffman singles out one as particularly significant: the Equipoise Award she received from the Lexington, Ky., chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners for maintaining a balance between her family and career. As one former law clerk wrote in a reunion “memory book,” Judge Coffman “was, and is, a highly impressive ... example of a person who has successfully balanced a full, rich family life with the rigors of a very accomplished legal career.”

Despite limited time, Judge Coffman's “true blue” blood called her to serve on numerous University of Kentucky Law School committees and to teach legal writing as an adjunct professor. The university honored her for her service by inducting her as a charter member into the University of Kentucky's Hall of Fame. Blending service to the legal community with service to her larger community, Judge Coffman also served on the boards of directors for the YWCA of Lexington, Ky., and the Shepherd Center Rehabilitation Hospital in Atlanta, Ga., and also assumed many roles in her Presbyterian Church.

Active in the bar association, Judge Coffman agreed to chair the state bar convention in 1992. She was tapped for her current position that same year. When first approached by then U.S. Sen. Wendell H. Ford (D-Ky.), she demurred at the offer, because a federal judgeship was never a position she had considered. Her law practice was very rewarding and her children were still relatively young—just 9 and 12. Sen. Ford asked her to reconsider and she did. Those first years proved challenging, as she shuttled from Owensboro to London (a three-plus-hour drive) and back to Lexington for the first year and a half, before assuming her current Western District assignment in Louisville. In addition to spending hours on the road to perform her judicial duties, she spent many additional hours as a devoted “baseball and soccer mom” at sporting events.

Judge Coffman's office is dotted with whimsical mementos of both her personal life and her professional life, reflecting what others have described as a “robust sense of humor” and a “playful enjoyment of life.” Her sense of humor provides equilibrium to the dedication and gravity she brings to each case presented before her.

One case that has thrust the quiet judge into the spotlight a number of times over the years concerns

the display of the Ten Commandments in Kentucky's state courthouses and schools or on their property. In *American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky v. McCreary Cty., Ky.*, 145 F. Supp. 2d 845 (E.D. Ky. 2001), Judge Coffman held that framed displays of the Ten Commandments at two county courthouses as well as in the schools of Harlan County violated the First Amendment and warranted preliminary injunctive relief in favor of the plaintiffs. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, where Judge Coffman's decision was affirmed. See *McCreary County, Kentucky v. American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky*, 545 U.S. 844 (2005). A combination of judicial integrity and scholarship pervades Judge Coffman's opinions. Reflecting her commitment and humility, she discreetly attended the oral argument of the ACLU case in the U.S. Supreme Court as a member of the public.

Since assuming the role of chief judge of the Eastern District of Kentucky, Judge Coffman has traded a portion of her case load for administrative duties, but she continues to do "whatever it takes" to keep her dockets moving in both districts. In fact, on her very first day as chief judge in the Eastern District, she was overseeing cases in the Western District in Louisville. And even though she has retired the title of "baseball and soccer mom," she continues to log hours of travel time to see her now grown children, one of whom lives in Washington, D.C., and the other in New York City.

Eager to learn from others about how to facilitate the administration of justice, the judge employs her unique status as roving judge to learn and to share information across district lines. Chief Judge Coffman also has organized formal training sessions for law clerks and docketing clerks, in which she empowers more senior clerks to contribute to the pedagogy. Her own law clerks comment on the "many teachings" provided by "Judge Coffman, the mentor."

Judge Coffman was granted the opportunity to share her experience with a wider judicial audience in May 2003, when, along with Judge Paul Friedman of Washington, D.C., she taught newly appointed judges in Richmond, Va. Her first class of what is commonly called "baby judges school" was quickly dubbed the "Richmond Twelve" and members of that class remain in close contact with the judge.

Explaining that he had "done a little bit of intelligence work," one member of the class, Judge Robert A. Junell of the Western District of Texas, discovered that Judge Coffman had been crowned as the Kentucky Derby Festival Queen in 1965. (The list of illustrious alumnae of this award also includes the former governor of Kentucky, Martha Layne Collins.) Judge Junell and Judge John Adams of the Northern District of Ohio promptly christened Judge Coffman "the queen," and she accepted the title with characteristic good grace and humor. Judge Junell recalls that "there could not have been a better mentor judge" and notes that her experience in teaching neophyte judges has

allowed her to literally influence the federal judiciary "from sea to shining sea." In addition to her tutelage of new judges, Judge Coffman served on the Judicial Resources Committee of the Judicial Conference for eight years. She currently sits on the Sixth Circuit Pattern Jury Instruction Committee and recently chaired the Planning Committee for the 2008 Sixth Circuit Judicial Conference.

Judge Coffman continues to serve the community at large in myriad ways. Her expansive sense of community is revealed not only by her formal charitable work but also by her more private actions. A few years ago, she learned through another judge's law clerk of an accident in which a young exchange student from Germany was seriously injured. The student's parents arrived from Germany but had nowhere to stay during their daughter's month-long rehabilitation. Judge Coffman did not hesitate to open her home to the couple, despite the language barrier, which she recalls caused more than one humorous exchange.

In the end, Judge Coffman's story is like her actions, one of quiet inspiration. In some ways an ordinary tale of professional and personal success. In all ways an extraordinary balancing act. **TFL**

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