

Judicial Profile

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Hon. Ronald Lee Gilman U.S. Circuit Judge, Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals

HON. RONALD LEE GILMAN is more partial to leather wing tips than blue suede shoes. And he prefers a black robe to a sequined jumpsuit. But Judge Gilman and Elvis Presley have both done well by their hometown of Memphis, Tenn. The “king” made his mark with a microphone and guitar; Judge Gilman has done so with his unyielding commitment to justice and the rule of law during the nearly nine years he has spent on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.



This commitment is set forth in the mission statement Judge Gilman adopted for his chambers shortly after taking the bench in 1997: “Our mission is to justly decide cases according to the law, to issue well-reasoned opinions in a timely manner, and to treat everyone involved in the process with courtesy and respect.” By all accounts, Judge Gilman has consistently met this high standard.

“Ron Gilman is smart, principled, thoughtful, and hard-working — a dedicated public servant of the

very best kind,” remarks Judge Julia Gibbons, who has sat with Judge Gilman on the Sixth Circuit for the past three years. “He decides each case solely on its own facts and its own law without reference to any particular result or outcome.”

David Grossman, one of Judge Gilman’s former law clerks, concurs in this assessment: “Both in chambers and in the courtroom, Judge Gilman always considered all sides of an issue and treated everyone with complete respect. Litigants cannot ask for a more unbiased, thoughtful judge to consider their cases.” Another former clerk, Robert Stonebraker, adds, “Judge Gilman brings an open mind to every case and decides it on the law and nothing else.”

Judge Gilman developed the character underlying his judicial demeanor during his formative years in Memphis. His parents, Seymour and Rosalind Gilman, stressed the importance of being polite and respecting others. And through his affiliation with the Boys Scouts of America, Judge Gilman learned the value of “doing the right thing,” no matter the personal cost.

These principles guided Judge Gilman once he left Memphis to attend college at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he initially pursued an engineering degree. A series of advanced calculus courses convinced him that engineering “was not the career for me.” Judge Gilman then set his sights on a law degree.

He also set his sights on Betsy Dunn, whom he met on a blind date during his senior year at MIT. A year later, Judge Gilman made the easiest decision in a life eventually filled with difficult choices — he asked for Betsy’s hand in marriage. They married shortly before Judge Gilman graduated, cum laude, from Harvard University Law School. Judge Gilman and Betsy Gilman will celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary in June 2006.

With a law degree in his hand and a new bride on his arm, Judge Gilman returned to Memphis to begin his law practice. He accepted a position as an associate at a small Memphis firm, earning the same \$500 monthly salary that Betsy was paid as an elementary school teacher. Judge Gilman eventually became a named partner at the firm, where he practiced for 30 years until joining the bench.

His career, however, was not limited to the practice of law. Judge Gilman also served as a professor at the

University of Memphis School of Law for 18 years. And he honed his adjudication skills as an arbitrator and mediator with both the American Arbitration Association and the National Association of Securities Dealers. Judge Gilman also managed to find the time to serve as president of both the Memphis and Tennessee Bar Associations.

By 1997, Judge Gilman had seemingly reached the pinnacle of his professional life. Then he received a telephone call that sent his career in an unexpected new direction. The call came from a client, who encouraged Judge Gilman to toss his name into the hat for a recent vacancy on the Sixth Circuit. Long eager to enter public service, Judge Gilman did just that. He sought assistance from two of his politically active senior partners, one of whom had served in the U.S. Senate. They recommended Judge Gilman to Vice President Al Gore; a nomination by President Bill Clinton followed in July 1997. After a 98-1 confirmation vote in the Senate, Judge Gilman took the bench in November 1997.

He took on his new duties with the able assistance of Jean Chalk, who had served as his secretary for 30 years and would now fulfill the role of administrative manager in his chambers. Judge Gilman also hired his first group of law clerks, whose assistance he would need in light of the fact that he had just two weeks to prepare for his first round of oral arguments in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the Sixth Circuit is based.

Judge Gilman survived those initial sessions and has since returned to Cincinnati for oral arguments on more than 80 occasions. Those appearing before Judge Gilman describe him as “incredibly well prepared” and “thoughtful,” and his fellow judges agree with that characterization. “Judge Gilman always had an intimate knowledge of both the facts and the controlling authority. He was also unfailingly polite to counsel,” observes U.S. District Judge James Gwin, who has sat by designation with Judge Gilman on the Sixth Circuit. “He provides a fine example of how judges should treat their cases and the people associated with those cases.”

When back in Memphis, Judge Gilman carries on judicial business from his chambers overlooking the Mississippi River. He interacts frequently with his four law clerks. Indeed, taking the concept of an open-door policy to its extreme, Judge Gilman had the door to his office physically removed.

And even though he is quite serious when it comes to official judicial affairs, Judge Gilman manages to keep the atmosphere in his chambers light. Staff meetings are held each Monday and Thursday. The first of these weekly meetings is referred to as “Magic Monday” and features a trick or two from Judge Gilman, the Sixth Circuit’s only amateur magician. At “Tidbit Thursday” meetings, Judge Gilman shares interesting facts or challenges his staff with various brainteasers. Lunch outings for the chambers staff coincide with



Judge Gilman and his law clerks at Gilmanfest 2005.

these weekly meetings. Judge Gilman’s law clerks have prepared a decorated wooden ball for each of the approximately 70 restaurants in the downtown Memphis area. Whichever ball emerges from “Judge G’s Lunchbox,” a gift from a group of his departing law clerks, determines where Judge Gilman and the staff will head for lunch.

The fun continues each year at “Gilmanfest,” a weekend event for past, present, and incoming law clerks. The weekend festivities include a barbecue hosted by Judge Gilman and his wife and brunch at the famous Peabody Hotel. Judge Gilman caps off the event with a magic show.

When not entertaining law clerks, the Gilmans enjoy spending time with their family, which now includes two children, Laura and Sherry, two sons-in-law, and three grandchildren. They are eagerly anticipating the birth of their fourth grandchild later this year.

Judge Gilman has given his growing family much of to be proud. His many professional accomplishments are no doubt impressive. But the integrity, humility, and kindness he has demonstrated in achieving them are even more striking. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone more deserving of the respect accorded to members of the judiciary. He is indeed the “Honorable” Ronald Lee Gilman. **TFL**

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