

## Judicial Profile

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### Hon. Sarah S. Vance Chief Judge, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana

PERHAPS THE BEST description of Judge Sarah S. Vance is the one that was offered by her friend and colleague, Judge Royal Furgeson of the Western District of Texas: “Some judges simply stand out because of their ability, their intellect, and their disposition. Judge Sarah Vance is one of those judges.” These sentiments are echoed by countless others who have had the opportunity to work with Judge Vance during her time as a litigator and judge, and they accurately describe this insightful, disciplined, and compassionate jurist, who currently serves as the chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana.



Judge Vance's journey to the federal bench began in the small town of Donaldsonville, La., which is approximately 40 miles south of Baton Rouge. As Judge Vance describes it, Donaldsonville was a place where “you knew everybody, and everyone knew you.” Her father, an Army veteran, had grown up there and, following his service in World War II, elected to return home, having recently married. During the war, he served as a captain, and suffered paralysis on his left side as a result of a head injury sustained during the Battle of France. Despite his injuries, he had a long and successful career as a public school teacher and administrator, demonstrating to his daughter the value of perseverance and hard work.

Similarly, Judge Vance's mother was also an enormous influence. An Italian immigrant who spoke no English until the age of five, she obtained an English degree and taught high school English and Spanish for many years before becoming a school principal. As the daughter of an English teacher, Judge Vance developed a love of reading that has lasted to this day by picking up whatever books her mother had just finished reading, including works by Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, John O'Hara, Truman Capote, and numerous others.

That love of reading, combined with the benefit of having parents who were both teachers, undoubtedly

contributed to Judge Vance's academic success. After graduating first in her class from Ascension Catholic High School in Donaldsonville, Judge Vance spent the next four years at Louisiana State University, where she again finished first in her graduating class, collecting numerous honors and awards along the way. Although she initially considered a career in journalism, she found herself drawn to literature and political philosophy, leading her to receive a bachelor's degree in political science in 1971.

During her time at LSU, Judge Vance also met another key influence in her life—her husband, Pat. Recalling the first time she introduced him to her parents, Judge Vance notes that he “had longish hair and round, wire-rimmed glasses, which my father promptly dubbed, ‘Berkeley glasses.’ My father asked him if he was a radical or something. I guess Pat did look a little like Leon Trotsky.” Judge Vance cites her husband's unqualified support—as well as their shared love of politics, music, and LSU football—as some of the keys to their successful 38-year marriage. Today, Pat is a partner at Jones, Walker, Waechter, Poitevent, Carrère & Denègre LLP, a prominent Gulf Coast law firm.

After graduating from college, Judge Vance spent several years as a research analyst at the Public Affairs Research Council, a private, nonprofit research organiza-

tion. Her research on various pieces of legislation and the efficacy of public institutions gradually sparked an interest in a career in the law. Interestingly, while still in high school, Judge Vance had taken a personality test designed to help students identify potential career paths, and her results indicated that “lawyer” was her best match. At the time, she had thought little of what the test showed; however, it proved to be prophetic—she excelled in law school upon enrolling at Tulane University in 1975, where she continued her remarkable streak of academic excellence by again finishing first in her class and by serving as the managing editor of the *Tulane Law Review*.

After graduating from law school, Judge Vance joined the well-respected New Orleans law firm of Stone, Pigman, Walther, Wittmann, & Hutchinson, where her practice focused on commercial litigation and white-collar criminal defense. Notably, she served as counsel for the National Collegiate Athletic Association in a variety of matters, including eligibility disputes and trademark cases. Her representation of the organization was occasionally unpopular locally, such as when she worked on a case that resulted in the disqualification of her alma mater’s starting center from playing in the Sugar Bowl. “My diehard LSU friends have probably never forgiven me,” she jokes.

While at Stone Pigman, she took a particular interest in antitrust law. In her first significant antitrust case, she represented the plaintiffs in multidistrict antitrust litigation that involved price fixing in the marine construction industry; the case ultimately produced more than \$175 million dollars in settlements. That litigation also introduced Judge Vance to a number of excellent antitrust lawyers, who were instrumental in getting her involved in the American Bar Association’s Antitrust Section, in which she is still active today.

Judge Vance’s career changed forever in 1994, when President Bill Clinton nominated her to become a federal judge. Given her outstanding academic and professional credentials, it is no surprise that she was quickly confirmed by the Senate. Since taking the bench, she has authored more than 2,000 opinions on dispositive issues and concluded thousands of cases. Despite a docket filled with hearings, conferences, and trials, she takes particular pride in personally writing opinions on every contested motion that comes before her. “I still love putting the facts together and applying the law to the facts of the particular case. It’s an honor to get to do it,” she says.

The effort that goes into producing those opinions and the intense preparation she undergoes before hearings and trials have not gone unnoticed. “Whenever I see an opinion from Judge Vance, I’m always happy, because they are excellent. She is always thorough and illuminating,” says Judge Stanwood Duval, one of her colleagues in the Eastern District of Louisiana. Judge Lance Africk, also of the Eastern District of Louisiana, offers a similar assessment: “Judge Vance is always the best prepared person in the courtroom. She exercises



(l to r) Judge Vance with her son, Bobby, and husband, Pat.

her judicial duties with integrity, fairness, and a comprehensive knowledge of the applicable law.” According to Judge Furgeson of the Western District of Texas, when one reads her opinions, “it is clear that she possess a first-rate mind, which is leavened by a common sense perspective and by a thoughtful dose of reality.” Those who practice before her share these sentiments. “During her time in my venue, the bar reported that she had a terrific temperament and ran a very efficient courtroom. Everyone wanted her back, and as often as possible,” noted Judge Furgeson.

The dedication that Judge Vance brings to her job as a federal judge was exemplified in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As a resident of New Orleans, she recalls, “I was lucky, because the water stopped about a block away from my house” Recognizing her good fortune, Judge Vance believed that the best way for her to help her community was to get back to work as quickly as possible. Accordingly, she set up an office in Baton Rouge just two days after the storm made landfall. Along with the other judges in the district, she presided over the thousands of hurricane-related suits that were filed in the months following the storm, including the numerous flood and homeowner’s insurance claims that transformed the Eastern District of Louisiana into one of the busiest district courts in the nation. Even though it was undoubtedly a trying time for all who lived and worked in southeastern Louisiana, Judge Vance took solace in the efforts of many of her fellow lawyers, as she expressed in an article for the *Howard Law Journal*: “Hundreds of lawyers worked tirelessly and selflessly to help protect the rights of those who were helpless. Volunteer lawyers from Louisiana and elsewhere worked to fill the gap in indigent representation. Their dedication to the rule of law and its meaning for all citizens was inspirational.”

Judge Vance has also played a significant role in judicial administration. From 1997 to 2003, she served on the Judicial Conference’s Committee on Administration of the Bankruptcy System, a position that, according to

the judge, provided “great opportunity to learn how our independent judiciary runs itself and to participate in that self-governance process.” In addition, she has been a member of the Fifth Circuit’s Judicial Council and also serves on the Fifth Circuit’s Civil Pattern Jury Instructions Committee. From 2003 until 2007, she served on the board of directors of the Federal Judicial Center and chaired the Judicial Education Committee for two years.

In 2008, Judge Vance was named chief judge of the Eastern District of Louisiana—her biggest responsibility as a judicial administrator to date. “We have such talented judges here at the Eastern District, and I enjoy working with them to meet the different challenges which arise. I want to help make the Eastern District the best court it possibly can be,” she says. She is especially interested in keeping the court up-to-date technologically, enthusiastically noting several pending improvements to the court’s ECF system, including the ability to file complaints electronically. She has also been involved in an extensive reworking of the court’s disciplinary rules as well as efforts to encourage additional pro bono work by lawyers who work in private law firms. Her work as chief judge has been widely praised. “She is the most conscientious person I know, and that has been especially apparent in her role as chief judge,” says Judge Duval.

As both a litigator and a judge, antitrust law has been an area of particular interest for Judge Vance. She has authored numerous articles on the subject and has extensive involvement with the ABA’s Antitrust Section. In connection with her participation in that section, she is scheduled to travel to China in late 2009, where she will participate in a unique panel, during which she and Judge Douglas Ginsburg of the D.C. Circuit will give a presentation on American antitrust law. After their presentation, which approximately 80 judges of the lower Chinese judiciary are expected to

attend, members of the Chinese Supreme Court will provide an overview of Chinese antitrust law.

When away from her duties on the bench, Judge Vance enjoys spending time with her family, including her son, Bobby, who has followed in his parents’ footsteps by becoming a law student at the University of Pennsylvania. Judge Vance also enjoys travel, the theater, and sports, particularly the LSU Tigers football team and the New Orleans Hornets. She also enjoys reading, crossword puzzles, and music, where her tastes range from opera, symphony, and jazz to pop. She particularly enjoys several annual music festivals held in New Orleans, such as Jazz Fest and the French Quarter Festival.

When asked to describe Judge Vance, Judge Carolyn King of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit expressed it well: “Judge Vance is the ideal judge: possessed of flawless integrity, great judgment, and extraordinary intelligence.” It is no wonder then that her colleague, Judge Africk, notes that, “as a member of this court, it is my greatest fear that those persons responsible for the submission of appellate court nominations will realize what an extraordinary appellate judge Sarah would make, and we will lose her to the circuit court.” No matter where Judge Vance’s career may lead, it is abundantly clear that she stands as an exemplar of the sort of lawyer and judge that all members of the bar should strive to emulate. **TFL**

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