



Hon. Michael G. Williamson, Chief Judge, U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Middle District of Florida

by Susan Heath Sharp



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On Oct. 1, 2015, Michael (“Mike”) G. Williamson will begin a four year term as chief judge for the Middle District of Florida, which is one of the busiest bankruptcy districts in the country. He was appointed as a bankruptcy judge in 2000 by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit and was reappointed to a second 14-year term in 2014.

Raised in a military family, Judge Williamson was born in West Point, New York—home of the U.S. Military Academy. Growing up as a son of a “West Pointer,” Judge Williamson has fond memories from his childhood of living in Spain and Taiwan. After attending West Point for two years, he decided to pursue his career dreams of becoming a lawyer by attending Duke University, where he received his undergraduate degree, magna cum laude, in 1973. He received his law degree from Georgetown University Law Center in 1976, where he served as the editor for the *Georgetown Journal of Law and Policy in International Business*.

Upon graduation, Judge Williamson began his legal career in Orlando, Florida, as an associate with Johnson, Motsinger, Trisman & Sharp PA for two years and for the next 20 years with Maguire Voorhis & Wells PA, where he became the president and managing partner. In 1998, Judge Williamson helped coordinate the merger of Maguire, Voorhis with Holland & Knight LLP.

Like most graduating law students, Judge Williamson aspired to be an outstanding, not merely good, attorney. He recognized that while his employer would provide him with legal training, the responsibility to professionally develop into a truly great lawyer fell on his shoulders. To that end, he focused on setting goals that ultimately led to him becoming one of the go-to bankruptcy attorneys in the state of Florida by becoming involved in the legal community, writing at least one scholarly article a year (22 before going on the bench), speaking at numerous seminars on



current bankruptcy topics, and developing long-term personal relationships with other attorneys. When in private practice, Judge Williamson made it his goal to “leave every case with a new friend by treating the other side with respect and congeniality, which was not only good for my clients, but led to new client referrals,” he says.

During his years in private practice, he was listed in *Best Lawyers in America* and *Who’s Who in American Law*. Among his many professional accomplishments were becoming board certified in Business Bankruptcy Law by the American Board of Certification and being inducted as a fellow of the prestigious American College of Bankruptcy (ACB) in 1993. Fellows of the ACB undergo a rigorous nomination process and are extended an invitation to join based on a record of achievement reflecting the highest standards of professionalism and exceptional contributions to the field of bankruptcy. His many professional activities include serving as a member of the executive council and as chair of the Business Law Section of the Florida Bar, where he was the first recipient of the

Business Law Section's Distinguished Lifetime Services Award; being elected to the American Law Institute in 2007; serving as the Eleventh Circuit governor to the National Conference of Bankruptcy Judges; teaching bankruptcy as an adjunct professor at Stetson University College of Law in Florida; and serving as a member and former president of the Judge J. Clifford Cheatwood Inn of Court.

In his spare time, Judge Williamson has undertaken countless international professional activities by traveling to Afghanistan seven times, and working with the U.S. Department of Commerce in the development of commercial and bankruptcy laws. He has also made trips to Azerbaijan, Macedonia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Rwanda to perform field studies and assessments of those countries' legal and institutional business climate for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Judge Williamson embodies all of the qualities of a great judge—judicial temperament, intelligence, experience and education, ability to communicate, and civic and professional responsibility. For those of us who appear before him, Judge Williamson is known to be thoroughly prepared before each hearing, even if a new attorney has not adhered to the “3-3-3 Rule.”¹ One of the pleasures in practicing before him is that we can devote our energies to developing the facts of the case and the application of the law to those facts rather than educating him on the applicable law. He is noted for unflinching courtesy to lawyers, witnesses, and clients in the courtroom and for his careful, deliberate, and fair consideration of issues in both small and large cases. In the courtroom, Judge Williamson does not just rule with a “granted” or a “denied.” He spends the time to explain the reasons for his rulings. Judge Williamson clearly enjoys his role as a judge and, although thoughtful and soft-spoken, he is also firm and manages his courtroom well.

Judge Williamson's willingness to teach is not limited to the courtroom; it includes his devotion to teaching law students as well. In addition to teaching the bankruptcy class at Stetson University College of Law, each semester he travels to Gainesville, Florida, to teach an advanced bankruptcy class to University of Florida law students. Judge Williamson also volunteers to judge Stetson's moot court team as practice for the Duberstein Moot Court Competition.

When asked what he enjoys most about being a judge, he will say writing decisions, because it enables him to influence and develop the law. With more than 175 published opinions, Judge Williamson is particularly proud of his opinion on critical vendors in the *Tropical Sportswear*² case, which has been cited more than 400 times, according to Westlaw.

Just as we know with certainty that he will take the

bench at the appointed hearing time. We also know that, beginning around 11:50 a.m., we need to wrap up our arguments. With rare exceptions, court will recess precisely at noon so Judge Williamson can go jogging for 30 minutes through the streets of downtown Tampa. He claims this is when he does some of his best thinking, although most of us believe he is always thinking. After his jog, he makes himself a protein shake for lunch and plays a few hands of bridge on his computer. Precisely at 1:30 p.m. he is either back on the bench or working at his desk.

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He has been married to his wife, Linda, for 35 years and has two adult children and (currently) three beautiful grandchildren under the age of 5. His wife is a judicial assistant, which allows him to keep a close pulse on current issues in state court. Together they enjoy spending time with family and friends, traveling, and boating.

Wow! I am exhausted from just writing about all Judge Williamson does and his lifetime of accomplishments. He is truly a remarkable judge, and the Tampa Bay bankruptcy bar is incredibly lucky to have such a devoted judge who truly loves his job! ©

Endnotes

¹ The 3-3-3 Rule essentially stands for “Keep it short!”

The first 3 stands for the number of pages, the second 3 stands for the maximum number of cases that should be cited for any proposition of law, and the third 3 applies to the length of your argument on routine matters.

² *In re Tropical Sportswear Int'l Corp.*, 320 B.R. 15 (Bankr. M.D. Fla. 2005).