



Hon. Lisa Raleigh

Administrative Law Judge, U.S. Social Security Administration

by Hon. Alisa Tapia-Zuniga



Hon. Alisa Tapia-Zuniga is a freelance writer and an administrative law judge for the U.S. Social Security Administration in Tallahassee, Fla. Prior to working for Social Security, Judge Tapia-Zuniga worked as an administrative judge for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Appeals Division, adjudicating all Spanish-speaking appeals in South Florida and Puerto Rico. © 2020 Alisa Tapia-Zuniga. All rights reserved.

Judge Raleigh was born in the Live Music Capital of the World—Austin, Texas—to Canadian parents, James and Doris Raleigh. Her mother worked as a secretary in the oil industry, where she met and eventually married Judge Raleigh's father. Her father, a civil engineer with a master's degree in petroleum engineering, was studying toward his Ph.D. at the University of Texas and, after Judge Raleigh's birth, the family moved to Canada. Her father had accepted a position with a Canadian subsidiary of a U.S. gas exploration company. He would eventually rise to the ranks of chief executive officer and chairman of the board.

With her slight Canadian accent, Judge Raleigh describes her childhood as happy. She recalls having a desire to one day become the prime minister of Canada. Judge Raleigh had a passion for reading, outdoor sports, and talking to new people. She explains that her talkative nature became useful later in her career when she took depositions, elicited testimony, and conducted trial examinations.

Nonetheless, Judge Raleigh's childhood did come with loss. When she was 12, her beloved father was diagnosed with metastatic melanoma. At age 14, she herself was diagnosed with early-stage melanoma because her father recognized the signs of the disease. Fortunately, she survived cancer due to early detection. A year later, however, her father succumbed to the disease. Judge Raleigh shares that her experience of this loss was emotionally stressful for years after her father's death and that she experienced a form of survivor's guilt—a condition that was not well-known at that time. In her despair—and with no clear plan—at age 18, Judge Raleigh left Canada and joined the U.S. Navy.

The U.S. Navy

From 1982 to 1986, Judge Raleigh served our country in the U.S. Navy. Her military experience, however, was not what she had envisioned. "I had a sheltered childhood in that old-fashioned European sense. I was still in the school system, where women delivered the vast majority of the instruction. I did not have a good perspective on the status of women in the larger world."



In 1985, Judge Raleigh was one of the first women stationed to an active duty patrol squadron in Jacksonville, Fla. At that time, the military was beginning to increase the types of jobs available to women; however, the inclusion practice came with vigorous resistance. The school of thought was that the military was not an appropriate place for women. Specific institutional regulations restricting the activities of women were entirely novel to Judge Raleigh. She explained that the most challenging aspect of her military experience was the disparate treatment of women.

In 1986, Judge Raleigh was deployed to Sicily, Italy, with a land-based anti-submarine warfare patrol squadron VP-56 at a NATO base (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The squadron's purpose was to sanitize the Mediterranean by keeping Soviet submarines at bay. As an E-3 aviation electronics technician, Judge Raleigh maintained the anti-submarine cryptographic electronics and other duties as assigned.

Despite military challenges, Judge Raleigh pushed forward toward the future. During her military service, she attained college credit for her military training and her professional experience, and through her participation in the U.S. Navy Campus for Achievement Program. After successfully passing

various comprehensive subject exams, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in general studies and received a Good Conduct Award for her military service. After her enlistment ended in September 1986, Judge Raleigh was ready to pursue her next goal—law school.

Florida State University Law School

From 1987 to 1990, the Florida Bar awarded Judge Raleigh a three-year Public Service Fellowship to attend Florida State University Law School. In her first year, she joined the Law Review. In her second year, Judge Raleigh was awarded a semester abroad scholarship to study European Community Law in Brussels, Belgium. In her third year, Judge Raleigh was awarded a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship to study international law in Barbados upon graduation.

Between her scholarships, part-time work, and the Veteran's Education Assistance Program, Judge Raleigh's legal education was paid in full by graduation day in April 1990. Three months later, she sat for and passed the Florida Bar exam.

International Study

In September 1990, Judge Raleigh embarked to Barbados to attend the University of West Indies Master's Program. She humorously shares that she was intellectually exhausted and "primarily majored in open water swimming." In reality, she studied amongst the "Commonwealth Scholars." Specifically, her colleagues included government lawyers from other Caribbean nations as well as from India, Guyana, Malaysia, and Pakistan. The commonwealth scholars focused on self-executing legislative drafting.

Studying abroad was a great experience for her. Judge Raleigh states, "I left Barbados so impressed with these lawyers, who strove to build legal governance in their home countries." Although she planned to pursue a career in private practice tax law, she left Barbados with a new goal of government practice. Upon her return to the United States, Judge Raleigh joined the Florida Office of the Attorney General.

The Practice of Law

In 1991, Judge Raleigh began her career in the Tax Division at the Florida Attorney General's Office. She handled administrative and circuit court cases from the answer to the final judgment. After four years of public service, Judge Raleigh worked for Holland & Knight for a year but realized that big firm life was not ideal for her. She felt the pull of public service, so she returned to the attorney general's office.

Judge Raleigh worked closely with investigators and lawyers throughout the 50 states to investigate consumer fraud and unfair and deceptive trade practices. Her duties included traveling to local civic clubs and educating the people of Florida about consumer fraud. She found the experience working with Rotary Clubs so fulfilling that she ended up joining one in her location.

As an experienced assistant attorney general, Judge Raleigh handled federal civil rights inmate cases in the Corrections Unit for one year. She then moved to the Economic Crimes Unit for six years. At the Economic Crimes Unit, she handled high-profile cases.

For instance, Judge Raleigh led the settlement committee for the 53-jurisdiction Firestone and Ford tire rollover investigation (tire failures linked to over 200 fatalities and over 800 injuries in the United States). She investigated the Rite Aid Corporation on a prescription pricing scam (a computer program designed to raise prices depending on the desperation of the customer). Judge Raleigh also worked on a civil RICO warranty fraud investigation of the world's largest battery manufacturer.

Bureau Chief of the Economic Crimes Unit

Judge Raleigh spent her last year as bureau chief of the Economic Crimes Unit. During her tenure, she recalls that there were four direct strike hurricanes in a single season. The unit was running the state Price Gouging Hotline, and her family time, including time with her preschool-aged child, was limited. She recalls not having a single day off for 100 days. After the hurricane season was over in late 2004, Judge Raleigh transferred to the Complex Litigation Unit.

The Complex Litigation Unit

From 2005 to 2015, Judge Raleigh was assigned to the Complex Litigation Unit handling all trial set cases. She handled RICO, inverse condemnation, constitutional challenges, and first impression statutory interpretation cases. She also guided young lawyers to grow in the legal profession, which she found extremely satisfying. She states, "Some of my most treasured documents are letters and notes to me by young lawyers."

Candidacy for Judicial Election

In 2006, Judge Raleigh took a leave of absence from the attorney general's office and ran for Leon County court judge. With no prior political experience, and her campaign members consisting of mostly family and friends, she came in third in a three-way race with a 28% vote.

In 2007, Judge Raleigh took a second leave of absence, and with her 16-year-old stepdaughter and 8-year-old son in tow, she left for China to teach English to engineering students. She explains that it was a great sharing and learning experience for her and the kids.

In 2008, Judge Raleigh ran for another open judicial seat on the circuit court. She made it through the primary but lost in the general election. Judge Raleigh explains that she learned a great deal from the experience. While running for office, she spent considerable time thinking and talking to others about the judgeship seat. In turn, she developed a greater appreciation for judges. To her surprise, she had more respect in the field after she ran and lost for office. After elections, Judge Raleigh was assigned to better cases. "I was considered to be a very

good lawyer when it was over even though I did not practice law much while I was running for judge.” Her advice to young people is to consider the electoral process, or even participate in any small way in any election. It will make you a better voter.

Judge Raleigh worked for the Complex Litigation Unit for over 10 years. In one memorable case, she recalls completing a 70-hour workweek handling an emergency hearing for a temporary injunction to close an assisted living facility for persons with mental illness. The hearing was estimated to last three hours. Instead, it lasted three days. Nevertheless, Judge Raleigh recalls, “we did excellent work during those ten years.”

In total, Judge Raleigh worked as a public servant for the Florida Attorney General’s Office for over 20 years. In reflecting on her career, she shares that her time with the attorney general’s office led to a lifetime of valuable legal experience. For instance, she drafted her first brief for the Florida Supreme Court. She also presented an oral argument before the Eleventh Circuit. Judge Raleigh explains that her broad background offered her an interesting perspective later as an administrative law judge (ALJ).

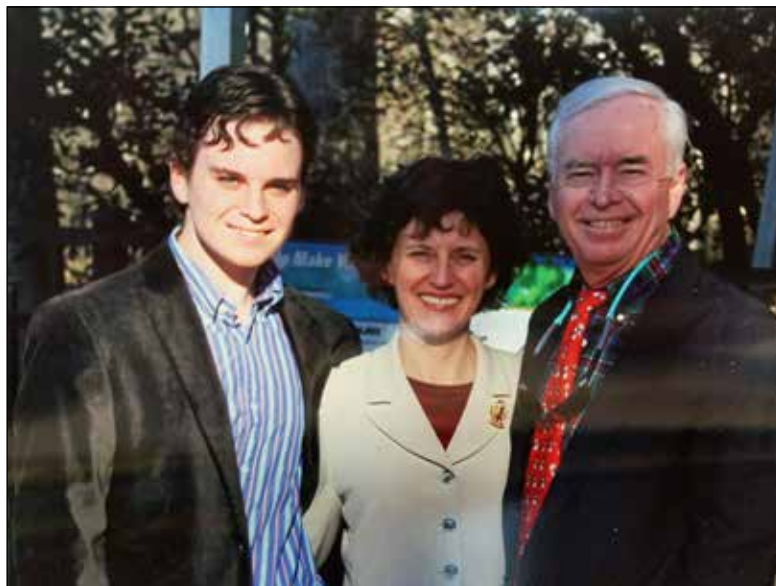
Administrative Law Judge for the Social Security Administration

In 2015, Judge Raleigh accepted a lifetime appointment as an ALJ for the Social Security Administration. She presides over cases in Tallahassee and Panama City, Fla., and Thomasville, Ga. Judge Raleigh’s experience as an ALJ has been eye-opening. She explains, “It is surprising to me the economic disparities among the three areas we serve.”

When asked what justice in the law means to her, Judge Raleigh states, “Our goal to achieve equal justice is to have all parties be heard, and the law fairly applied. On the bench, I make a point to often ask myself—*Would I do the same thing if the claimant were of another background?* I find the question to be remarkably effective in addressing biases of the subconscious, those which are societally ingrained. While it serves as an imperfect system in an imperfect world, it is a step I feel appropriate in ensuring the equal and fair treatment of all claimants, regardless of background.” Judge Raleigh further explains that in every hearing she holds is a personal commitment to equal justice under the law.

For lawyers seeking a career as an ALJ, Judge Raleigh advises, “Do not pursue it as your end goal. Timing is everything. Do not count on having a mix of experience, location, and contacts needed to be appointed in a post-OPM era. Today, if you want to be a federal ALJ, I would suggest five to seven years of litigation or appellate work, followed by two to three years in-house at the agency you would like to work for as an ALJ.”

In explaining what brings significant meaning to her career, Judge Raleigh states, “I have been part of an enormous societal change that now permits women largely equal access to education and increasing opportunities in



Judge Raleigh with her family.

the workplace. In retrospect, I find meaning and comfort in that.”

Family Life

Judge Raleigh’s greatest joys come from spending time with her family, which has always been a top priority. As the eldest of her siblings, Judge Raleigh has a sister, Barbara, who is a physics teacher; a brother, John, who is a journeyman in autobody and automobile mechanics; and a half-sibling, Michael, who is a lawyer in Northern Alberta, Canada.

Judge Raleigh and her husband, Jim, have been married for 23 beautiful years. She jokingly states, “and they said we wouldn’t last six months.” Jim currently works as a tax lawyer with a boutique firm in Florida. Their son, James Thomas, is an undergraduate student at Florida State University.

Despite working full-time and meeting family commitments, Judge Raleigh makes time to sustain a healthy lifestyle. She exercises and eats a healthy diet to maintain her stamina presiding over a high-volume case docket—another essential element of her life in her chosen profession.

When asked how she would like to be remembered after retirement, Judge Raleigh said, “Less than remembering me, remember the generation of women who were the first to enter college by the millions and persevered in the profession decade after decade.” In response, we say kudos to you, Judge Raleigh, for being a great inspiration for the next generation of women leaders. ☺