



Hon. J. Ronnie Greer

U.S. District Judge, Eastern District of Tennessee

by LeAnna R. Wilson



LeAnna R. Wilson is the clerk of court for the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Tennessee, where she has served since June 2021. Prior to that, she served for three years as the court's chief deputy clerk and for 11 years as career law clerk to Hon. J. Ronnie Greer, U.S. district judge.

"There's gold in them thar hills." This was the lead in a local newspaper article about a tax evasion case over which Hon. J. Ronnie Greer, U.S. district judge, presided.¹ While that article was referring to gold coins the defendant buried in the Cherokee National Forest, the phrase could also refer to the judge himself, raised in the hills of the Appalachian Mountains. Judge Greer's emphasis on country, family, environment, and faith throughout his career makes his heart of gold apparent to all who meet him or appear in his court.

Country

Judge Greer has served (and continues to serve) his country with distinction throughout his career in politics, as a lawyer, and now as a federal judge. James Ronnie Greer was born in Mountain City, Tenn., to David and Mary Ellen Greer. Mountain City is the county seat of Johnson County, the northeasternmost county in the state. You can see mountains for miles in every direction, smell the fresh air, and feel the dampness of the mountain streams. David Greer owned a small farm on which he grew tobacco and raised dairy cattle. Judge Greer and his sister, Sharon, attended the local public schools. Living in a rural mountain town, Judge Greer's only exposure to the outside world was through books. He devoured every book that he could from the Watauga Regional Library's traveling truck that drove through town every two to three weeks. Eventually, Johnson County established its own branch library that started in a local schoolteacher's house, where Judge Greer was a frequent patron.

During high school, Judge Greer frequented the local courthouse, often during school hours, to watch a trial or hearing after combing the docket for interesting matters. He knew from a young age that he wanted to be a lawyer. The vice principal at his high school knew it too and agreed to this school-hour courtroom arrangement—at least until the principal caught him sneaking back to class after one such outing. Then, it was back to only reading about the proceedings (at least during school hours).

It was at this same courthouse that Judge Greer developed his love for politics. Judge Greer's father



took him to a congressional campaign event at the courthouse that piqued his interest. From that point on, he became progressively more involved in politics throughout high school, college, and beyond. Judge Greer attended East Tennessee State University, where he worked hard to overcome his fear of public speaking. He continued to feed his love of learning and reading by working in the acquisitions department of the university's library, where he had the opportunity to read the new books coming into the collection. In 1974, he graduated with a B.S. in history and political science.

Judge Greer then attended the University of Tennessee College of Law. Because of his strong interest in politics, he took time off from law school to work on a congressional campaign. Afterwards, he returned to law school but once again put law school on hold to work on Lamar Alexander's 1978 gubernatorial campaign. Judge Greer was instrumental in planning Alexander's walk-across-the-state campaign, a journey of 1,022 miles from Mountain City to Memphis, Tenn. Alexander won the governor's race and later became a U.S. senator, serving from 2003 to 2021.

Alexander encouraged Judge Greer to finish law school, and he did so while working in Alexander's

Knoxville office as his special assistant. He graduated in 1980 and passed the bar the same year.

Then, attorney Thomas Gray Hull, who later became a U.S. district judge, convinced Judge Greer to move to Greeneville, Tenn., to practice law. There, Judge Greer established a successful general practice. On the advice of another one of his mentors, attorney Charles R. Terry, Judge Greer accepted whatever case that came through the door and became skilled in many different practice areas.

Politics called him into service once again, and Judge Greer temporarily left his law practice to manage the U.S. Senate Campaign of Rep. Robin Beard, R-Tenn. He returned to practice in Greeneville during the latter part of 1982. He served as Greene County attorney from 1985 to 1986. Judge Greer then made the transition from managing campaigns to running for office himself, and he served as a state senator from 1986 to 1994 while simultaneously continuing his law practice until June 2003.

On June 12, 2003, President George W. Bush appointed Judge Greer as a U.S. district court judge for the Eastern District of Tennessee, to succeed Judge Hull, and he assumed his duties on June 25, 2003. Judge Greer served as an active district judge until 2018, and he continues to serve his country as a senior district judge to this day.

While on the bench, Judge Greer presided over many cases of first impression and difficult legal issues, from both a substantive standpoint and a human perspective. He presided over a large multidistrict antitrust litigation² and an extremely heavy criminal docket. He has been successful as a judge because of his unrelenting work ethic. Judge Greer has said, "I decided many years ago that what I lacked in intellect I could make up with hard work." His goal in any court appearance is to be the most prepared person in the courtroom, and it is obvious that he always is. You can observe that many out-of-town lawyers from large cities, who do not know his reputation, come to his court expecting easy hearings. They quickly realize it will be anything but easy, for the judge is better prepared than they are. While he has always said his work ethic compensates for any lack of intellect, no attorney who has ever had the pleasure of practicing before him would argue he lacks either.

There is not a single piece of paper or electronic communication that comes into chambers that he does not read. Whether one sentence or hundreds of pages, not a single order gets filed without his having combed over every word. To his law clerks, he emphasizes that they must follow the law no matter the outcome and despite his personal opinions.

A sharp intellect, tireless work ethic, and dogged determination have enabled Judge Greer to serve his country with distinction and honor.

Family

Throughout his impressive career, Judge Greer has always put family first. Judge Greer met his wife, Bunny, while he was serving as a state senator, and they have been married for 27 years. Bunny's smile is as infectious

as her fun personality. The dimmest room is brightened by her presence. Her personality is the perfect complement to Judge Greer's somewhat gentle and unassuming demeanor. The love they share is mightily apparent when you see the two together.

Judge Greer and Bunny have one daughter, Hannah, who is 25 years old. Hannah was a frequent guest at the courthouse and Judge Greer's chambers as a child. When she was in elementary school, she would walk around the courthouse gathering sponsors for her read-a-thon. She would also talk about her latest entrepreneurial or creative idea and spread smiles just like her mother. Hannah has grown into a lovely young woman and her grace and beauty shine from the inside out. It is no wonder she is now an emergency room nurse, helping those hurting and in need at the most stressful and scariest times of their lives.

Judge Greer's dedication to his family is one of the things that makes him an understanding and caring judge. Anytime you mention one of his family members, especially Hannah, the pride in his eyes is unmistakable. He recognizes the importance of family and how his decisions on the bench affect the families of those who appear before him.

Environment

Judge Greer's passion for environmental stewardship has been evident throughout his career. When he was elected to the state senate, his goal was to focus on a principal issue and effect as much change in that area as possible. Growing up in the Appalachian Mountains, surrounded by their beauty and majesty, it is little surprise that he chose to focus on the environment. Judge Greer became the chairperson of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, which later became known as the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Conservation, and Tourism. During his time as chairperson, no major piece of environmental legislation was passed that he had not sponsored or co-sponsored. He authored and was the prime sponsor of the Tennessee Solid Waste Management Act, which is still the law today.³ Judge Greer was named Legislator of the Year by the Tennessee Conservation League in 1989 and by the Environmental Action Fund in 1994.

Judge Greer's love for and focus on the environment continued in his law practice. Judge Greer accepted as many cases involving environmental issues as possible, and those cases became a large part of his private practice. In addition, Judge Greer has had the opportunity to preside over environmental cases while on the bench. Environmental issues will always be a top priority for Judge Greer.

Faith

Finally, Judge Greer's life and career have reflected his great faith. Judge Greer and Bunny are members of Towering Oaks Baptist Church. He lives his faith every day by being humble, authentic, and kind—by listening and making sure those who speak with him or appear in his



Above: Judge Greer and his wife, Bunny, and daughter, Hannah, at his portrait unveiling ceremony. Right: Watercolors of Judge Greer's core values painted by daughter, Hannah, when she was a child.



court know they have been heard. Moreover, he demands civility in his courtroom. Civility has become a buzz word as of late, but it has always been an expectation in Judge Greer's courtroom. When lawyers get heated with each other, you often hear Judge Greer say, "Direct your comments at me counsel, not at each other." He quickly diffuses tense situations by being respectful and even-tempered. He demands that litigants and lawyers respect each other, and the result is respect for the judge as well.

Courthouse cultures tend to reflect the collective personalities of the presiding judges. The James H. Quillen U.S. Courthouse in Greeneville, where Judge Greer has presided as the only sitting district judge from his appointment in 2003 until 2018 when he took senior status, is no exception. When you walk into this courthouse, you feel like you are returning to your home after a long, hard day. You are entering a place where you are safe, where you are valued, where you have permission to be vulnerable to shoot for the stars, and where someone with a kind, encouraging word will catch you if you fall. Judge Greer has facilitated this culture by his open-door policy, which applies to all employees of the building, not just court personnel. Every problem that arises is calmly discussed while all stakeholders are present. He listens to everyone's input and derives a reasonable solution with no fuss, insults, blame, or drama. This approach is successful

because of Judge Greer's humility and kindness. When court personnel planned his portrait unveiling ceremony, his only request was that the ceremony "not be about him but about everyone else who had supported him."

Judge Greer is not only respected by courthouse employees, litigants, and lawyers, but also by his fellow judges. Hard issues come before courts on a daily basis. During judges' meetings, where judges resolve these hard issues, Judge Greer mostly remains silent. But when he speaks, you can see that even the other judges sit up straighter and listen.

U.S. District Judge Clifton L. Corker practiced before Judge Greer as a lawyer, served under Judge Greer as the Greeneville division's magistrate judge, and now works alongside Judge Greer as a fellow district judge. He has helped sustain the courthouse culture Judge Greer fostered. Judge Corker shares the following:

Judge Greer is the gold standard for the kind of person our justice system needs as a judge. He understands his role as a judge better than anyone else I ever appeared before or have worked with. He commands respect not because of the position he holds but for who he is in that position. He exercises with great virtue the power he has been given. He is kind and compassionate but does not shy away from seeing that justice is done. He is smart and witty and treats all who appear before him with the greatest respect and dignity they deserve. His legacy will be recounted for generations by the testimony of those whose lives he changed.

Judge Corker's description of Judge Greer is accurate because Judge Greer lives his faith every day. Of course, Judge Greer will not lay claim to this legacy because he is just too humble for that.

How do you sum up a successful career? Abraham Lincoln, who Judge Greer admires, said, "In the end, it's not the years in your life that count, it's the life in your years." While that is certainly true, and Judge Greer has done just that, Hannah's summary of her father is even more on point. As a young child, she painted Judge Greer's core values with watercolors, and it hangs in his chambers to this day. It was painted by *family* and is displayed with loving pride. It depicts an American flag to show his devotion to his *country*; a tree, what Hannah now calls a "floating tree," to represent his love for the *environment*; and a church to represent his steadfast *faith*. Judge Greer lives by his values every day to achieve his success. And he is successful because of his focus on these values—well, and a lot of hard work! ☺

Endnotes

¹Jamie Satterfield, *\$200K in Gold, Silver Coins Linked to Tax Evader*, KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL, Oct. 12, 2010.

²Amended Complaint, *In re Se. Milk Antitrust Litig.*, No. 08-1000, MDL 1899 (E.D. Tenn. Mar. 28, 2008), ECF No. 34.

³Tennessee Solid Waste Management Act of 1991, TENN. CODE ANN. §§ 68-211-101–68-211-124.