



Hon. Sheryl H. Lipman

Chief Judge, Western District of Tennessee

by Bryce Ashby and Sarah Stuart



Bryce Ashby is an attorney with Donati Law, PLLC in Memphis, Tennessee. Bryce served as a law clerk to Judge Bernice B. Donald from 2008-2009 and as Chair for Western District of Tennessee's Local Rules Committee. Sarah Stuart is an associate attorney with Burch, Porter & Johnson, PLLC in Memphis, Tennessee. Sarah served as a law clerk to Judge Lipman from 2016-2017 and as a law clerk to Judge Bernice B. Donald from 2017-2018. She is presently a Board Member of the Memphis Mid-South Chapter of the Federal Bar Association.

Sheryl H. Lipman launched her interest in law as an eighth-grader, hosting “The Sheri Lipman You-Never-Know-What-You-Can-Do-Until-You-Try-and-Then-Its-Too-Late Comedy Hour-and-a-Half,” a show where she played bits and read odd, crazy laws that were still on the books. Her father, Clifton Lipman, served on the board of WEVL, a Memphis-based independent, volunteer radio station. Her wit and intellect, along with the influence of her family on her character and humanity, continue to serve those who appear in her court and work alongside her as chief judge for the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Tennessee.

Judge Lipman's story begins and continues today in Memphis, a city nestled on the Mississippi River—her chambers now overlooks it. She was born and raised in Memphis, along with her brother, Barton Lipman—a professor in the economics department at Boston University, and her sister, Elise Jordan—the executive vice president-CFO of FedEx Express.

She came to her desire to serve the community honestly and through the examples of her grandmother, mother, and father. Her grandmother, Ida Lipman, was a Russian immigrant, who as a child moved to Saskatchewan, Canada as part of a homesteader program that gave families plots of land to farm. She graduated from the Saskatoon Normal School around 1920 and worked as a teacher. Judge Lipman says that the family's efforts at farming were met with failure, and they eventually followed relatives to Memphis.

Ida passed on a devotion to service, dedicating much of her life to helping the elderly. She was a Tennessee representative to the First White House Conference on Aging in 1961, was involved in the development of Senior Services—which later became Meritan (an organization providing a variety of senior support services in Memphis), she and helped to found Plough Towers—a federally subsidized community that provides independent housing and services for seniors in Memphis. Her grandmother was also deeply involved in B'nai B'rith, the international human rights and service organization, and she was once on a B'nai B'rith speakers' dais with Eleanor Roosevelt!



Judge Lipman's mother, Sandra Lipman, also instilled in her three children a need to give back to the community and a recognition of the importance of education. Sandra worked for a few years as a teacher with the Memphis City Schools and then went into administration in the Division of Human Relations, which was tasked in the early 1970s with training teachers and designing modules to handle the complex issues that came from busing (the practice of transporting children into different school districts in an effort to desegregate them). It was the early days of diversity training. Judge Lipman says that she may not have understood the exact content of her mother's work, but that their family believed strongly in the need for busing to tear down the framework of “separate but equal.”

Clifton Lipman was also a major source of inspiration. Mr. Lipman worked as a roofer until his late-30s, and then he went to law school. He has spent much of his career working in construction law and engaged deeply in community service. He was a volunteer with Runaway House (which later became Family Services) and volunteered as a juvenile probation officer, in addition to his service on the board of WEVL.



Scientology, which paid the bills.

After law school, Sheryl began a federal clerkship with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit's Judge Julia Smith Gibbons, who was then serving as a district court judge in the same chambers that Chief Judge Lipman now occupies. She found this experience to be invaluable and has tried to model her demeanor now based on what she observed of Judge Gibbons. She says Judge Gibbons had a particular talent for recognizing the formality and respect that the court demands without overwhelming the attorneys and parties by stifling the personality and humanity of those before the court. Judge Gibbons now reflects a similar admiration for her former law clerk, noting:



Top: Judge Julia Gibbons administers the Oath of Office to Judge Lipman at her investiture. Bottom: Judge Lipman is joined at a lunch outing by former law clerks and former Judicial Assistant Cathy Gray.

Sheryl decided to pursue her education at the University of Michigan, where her brother was a graduate student studying economics. Although she would later come full circle, she wanted to leave Memphis and the south. In her time at Michigan, she interned with the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) Office of Legislative Affairs. In the summer of 1983, she worked under civil rights leaders Wade Henderson and John Shattuck, who would play a major role in establishing the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and Yugoslavia, as well as negotiating the Dayton Peace Agreement. In her work with the ACLU, she assisted the staff in lobbying in D.C. about issues such as prayer in public schools.

After graduating, she attended New York University Law School. She found her time in the Criminal Law Clinic and the Public Interest Litigation Clinic to be incredibly rewarding and the most effective training for when she became a lawyer. She spent a summer working for a public interest law firm in Los Angeles that did a significant amount of work handling housing discrimination cases. The firm was able to provide those services by also performing tax work and representing the Church of

"I have known Sheri Lipman well since she clerked for me on the district court in 1987-1988. She has always been deeply grounded in her family and the community. She combines a servant's heart with the intellect, lawyerly skills, and discipline to render dispassionate, thoughtful, and impartial decisions. I'm proud to have played a small role in mentoring her at the beginning of her legal career."

After her judicial clerkship, she went to work for Reed Smith in Washington, D.C. for the next two-and-a-half years, focusing on criminal white collar defense. Then she returned to Memphis, drawn in by Memphis's reckoning with its history and the injustices and pains of the past, knowing a challenging and interesting life could be made in the city. After working at local firms, McDonnell Boyd and Burch Porter & Johnson, she worked from 1999 to 2014 in the General Counsel's Office at the University of Memphis, first as a senior attorney, and then after 2002 as the university's general counsel.

Judge Lipman looks on her time at the University of Memphis with great pride and fondness. She says that the wide variety of issues she addressed on a day-to-day basis was intellectually challenging. From construction, creating an academic department, employment matters, and safety issues to NCAA compliance, every day brought a new challenge. She especially values the interactions with faculty and staff and the problem-solving opportunities that work at the university presented. Judge Lipman is married to Dale Anderson, who retired from the U.S. Navy after 20 years as a photojournalist and retired a second time after working for the Navy as a civilian. Mr. Anderson regularly has showings of his photography work throughout Memphis.

Judge Lipman was appointed by President Barack Obama to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Tennessee in 2013 and was unanimously confirmed in 2014. In her nine years on the bench, Chief Judge Lipman has adjusted to the more isolated nature of her work.

She benefits from the comradery of the bench in this

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who is a recent graduate of The Ohio State University and will be attending law school, and Lauren, who is a college sophomore studying interior design. He enjoys playing tennis and rooting for the New Orleans Saints, Memphis Grizzlies, and The Ohio State Buckeyes.

Reflecting on his family's journey from Vietnam to America, Judge Pham has a deep appreciation for the generosity shown, and the opportunities given, to him and his family. His parents were able to send all their children to college. His oldest sister studied journalism, became a television news

reporter, and won an Emmy award for a documentary about their family's journey. His brothers studied engineering and business and became successful businessmen. His other sisters have careers in hospitality, nursing, and pharmacy. As he says, "We came to America with absolutely nothing to offer it, yet this country took us in, gave us food and shelter, and most importantly, gave us a second chance at life." With that second chance, the judge and his family have built careers, raised strong families, and contributed to their communities—demonstrating that the American Dream is alive and well. ☺

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district and the judges' collective focus on improvement to the court, even among their varying perspectives. As part of her service to the court, Judge Lipman has emphasized civics outreach, including chairing the committee that established the court's first "Teachers' Law School," a day where local educators were exposed to the judiciary branch by observing a sentencing, hearing from members of the federal bar, and interacting with the bench. Over time, she has honed her approach to the bench, realizing that there is a time that every decision needs to be made, and as there will always be plenty to do, also a time to go home at the end of the day. Like many judges, she finds the most challenging part of her role as a federal trial judge to be criminal sentencing, particularly supervised release violations, noting the tension between the deterrent effect of a criminal sentence, the damage done to victims, and the damage to an individual and their family when removed from their home.

In January 2023, Judge Lipman assumed the duties of chief judge, followed shortly thereafter by the appointment of a new clerk of court, Wendy Oliver, following the retirement of long-time Clerk of Court Tom Gould. Although a dual transition may be seen as a challenge to most, Judge Lipman sees it as an opportunity to streamline procedure and improve the court through new viewpoints. She serves the public not only as chief judge but also on the Judiciary's Financial Disclosures Committee, including on an ad hoc committee that has developed a standardized process for ensuring circuits coordinate on the conflict screening process. These roles are well-suited for Judge Lipman's temperament and preference for clear-

ly established procedures that ensure access to, and the experience in, the court are the same for all who enter.

Chief Judge Lipman passes on the same wisdom and perspective to her current law clerks once bestowed upon her by Judge Gibbons, with a view that her service as a federal judge includes training young practitioners who serve as law clerks and externs in her chambers. Her sincere intellect and thoughtful perspective on the law and legal writing benefit each lawyer who passes through her chambers. As former law clerk Emily Linehan reflects, Judge Lipman is well known for her devotion to justice, mentorship, and dogs (although not necessarily in that order). Her law clerks value her steadfast advice, her practical perspective on the legal practice, her openness to canine companions in chambers, and even her oft-used red pen. Among the many lessons, a former law clerk, Sam Cortina, shares a common refrain learned from Judge Lipman: "I'll never be late to court. I'll also never be on time to court. I will always, instead, be early." Judge Lipman's emphasis on timeliness is emblematic of her approach to the bench and her leadership. There is not anything that she asks of either litigants who appear before her or those who work in her chambers that she does not demonstrate daily—a strong work ethic, an open mind, and a commitment to fairness.

Memphis drew Judge Lipman back after her early career and is now the beneficiary of her wisdom and commitment to the judiciary. She looks forward to sharing the city with members of the federal bar at this year's annual FBA convention. ☺

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