

Judicial Spotlight

An Interview With Judge Jason E. Ashford, State Court of Houston County



LaToya S. Bell

Judge Jason E. Ashford has been the only State Court judge in the Houston Judicial Circuit since 2010. After graduating from Florida State University College of Law in 1993, Ashford was admitted to practice first in Missouri in 1996 and then Georgia in 2000. He practiced two years for a private firm and then started his career in the U.S. Air Force. Ashford requested to be assigned on the eastern seaboard and was stationed at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri where he met his wife. He was later stationed at Robins Air Force Base in Georgia. He then made Warner Robins, Georgia, his home and continued his legal career at the Houston County District Attorney's office where, over the course of 10 years, he was both chief assistant district attorney and acting district attorney. Ashford is a working family man and public servant. He is active in his community in various legal organizations. During this time of pandemic pandemonium, Ashford has kept the Houston County State Court on the cutting edge of out-of-the-box ideas to cope with this new normal in the judicial system.

Ashford is very approachable and always willing to share with the lawyers, young and old, of the local bar. He shared some of his most memorable moments and advice with me during our interview. When he was first elected as judge, he was told to "never wear your jacket under your robe," by one colleague. "Don't let them put a cash register on the bench. It's about justice," from another colleague. I can attest that Ashford has abided by this piece of advice. He doesn't let sentences become "about the money." He considers defendants' financial status and ability to pay. Ashford has also recently revised the fine schedule for certain offenses so that the fine matches the crime. He was

also given this wise piece of advice, "Don't get a big head. Don't get robe-itis."

While Ashford didn't graduate law school thinking he'd become a judge, he ran for this office because he felt there was "a big problem in State Court" and he "fancied himself a problem solver." Ironically, he has never considered himself to be a lawyer. He was first an Air Force officer, then a prosecutor, now a judge. The first time he walked out onto the bench, he described it as "surreal." He knows that he must not be "afraid to make mistakes and take chances." Because of this he doesn't worry about being overturned in the higher courts because as he sees it, "either he gets it right now, or they get it right later and either way it turns out right in the end." Overall, his biggest concern is making sure he is being consistent and fair, while being aware of his emotions and being even-handed so as to not "play favorites."

When asked what he does not like to see in the courtroom from lawyers he said, "I do not like when attorneys make [] personal attacks in the courtroom." Ashford likes for lawyers to assume the best in people and "never ascribe to meanness what can be described as incompetence." This type of thinking is what makes his courtroom an environment of collegiality and fairness. He also does not like when lawyers are not prepared. He enjoys seeing continuous improvement from young lawyers and seasoned lawyers alike. We must learn from mistakes made and seek to correct whatever went awry.

If Ashford is not on the bench, speaking at his Optimist Club meetings, participating



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in Rotary Club or any of the other various community and civic organizations he is a member of, he is doing or dreaming of doing one of his many hobbies that include, skiing, horseback riding, white water kayaking, weightlifting, playing chess, reading or "poorly" playing the piano.

Ashford's career is centered on this self-proclaimed motto: "Don't be a jerk! It's sometimes hard not to, but we must!" In all things, we are judged by how we treat people who can provide us no benefit or retaliate in no way. Having the opportunity to serve Houston County with a positive attitude and while focusing on judicial efficiency has been the core of Judge Ashford's judicial career. YLD

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