

Democratic Club of Boca Raton and Delray Beach- candidate Questionnaire

Debra Stephens

1. Please provide a short biography.

My name is Debra Moses Stephens and I am your County Court Judge. I attended Duke University where I received a B.A. degree in English with a specialization in American Literature in 1984. I received my J.D. from Howard University School of Law in 1987. I have practiced law for 32 years; thirteen years as a Assistant Public Defender and twenty years as a judge. I am a member of the Florida Bar since 1987 and the District of Columbia Bar since 1990. I have been married to Don Stephens for thirty years and we have four adult children. My current community service includes the Riviera Beach Civil Drug Court and my church.

2. What experience do you bring to this position?

I have been a Palm Beach County Judge for twenty years. During that time I have served in South County and the Main Courthouse. I have worked in the county civil division for nine years, the county criminal division for two years and the domestic violence division for a total of 9 years. I have been the administrative judge for the criminal division and the domestic violence division and during that time I was on the chief judges executive committee. I was a mentor judge. I am currently the administrative judge for the traffic hearing officer program and the Riviera Beach Civil Drug Court. I have served on several subcommittees for the Criminal Justice Commission. I regularly receive training at the meeting of the Conference of County Court Judges, the Advanced Judicial College, webinars from the National Center for State Courts and others.

3. Why are you running?

I am the incumbent and I am uniquely qualified for this job. A good judge is one that is fair and not prone to submit to outside influences. For the last 20 years I have done this in a fair and unbiased manner to the best of my abilities. When I left Howard University School of Law, every professor impressed upon us a mission to be the change that you want to see. Even in High School I had a social action program as part of our school curriculum. In college I continued my community service work. There was never a time when my activities, from Girl Scouts to the Civil Drug Court, did not impress upon me the need to make my community my priority. After thirteen years in the Public Defender's Office, I went straight to the job of County Court Judge. County Court Judges are most likely to see those citizens who are unrepresented and who have never been to court. The people in my courtroom are often apprehensive, and frustrated by their first experience with court. My job is to serve my community. To help them understand the situation and the court's ruling. I love my job and I have prepared my entire life for it.

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4. What are the major influences in your life?

The major influences of my life are my mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. These women all survived difficult times and difficult situations. They all survived with grace intelligence and wit. My community service work and the many organizations that exposed me to this type of service. Judge Rodgers who encouraged me to apply to become a judge and who set an example of how a judge should carry out their work.

5. What is your general judicial philosophy as it pertains to the court on which you will sit as a judge?

For most of the Defendants and victims who appear in my court, it is their first time. Often their frustration can boil over. It has always been my goal to be clear about the process they must go through to conclude their case; either by trial or plea. In all my cases it is my intention to be fair, to listen to each side, and to apply the law evenly.

6. Would there be any specific types of cases in which you might find it necessary to disqualify yourself? Can you give us an example?

I would have to disqualify myself from cases involving my husband's law firm. However, they typically do not appear in County Court.

7. Why should voters support you rather than your opponent?

The citizens of Palm Beach County deserve a judge with experience. An experienced judge is able to manage the courtroom efficiently and handle the crises that are facing our justice system currently. As a domestic violence judge this is especially critical now as these cases are increasing and there are many essential hearings in this division. I have been at the forefront of the race to learn and implement the new technologies necessary to keep my division running. I have 20 years of experience as a County Court Judge. I have handled both County and Circuit court cases. I am passionate about my job and I care about all of my community. I am dedicated to helping others understand how the system works, and I am dedicated to its purpose.

8. Which justice of the Supreme Court, either alive or dead, would you like to meet and why?

I wanted to meet Thurgood Marshall. My family talked about him as I was growing up. I went to Howard University School of Law where for a solid year we spent our Saturdays in trial advocacy classes that were taught by judges and civil rights leaders that knew Justice Marshall. As my kids went through school, they did projects on Justice Marshall. He was an incredibly brilliant legal mind. A conversation with him about the current state of the courts would be enlightening.

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9. What do you perceive as the greatest obstacles to justice, if any?

The three greatest obstacles or challenges facing our justice system in Palm Beach County today are the Corona Virus, a decreasing response to the juror summons, and funding for programs to assist the mentally ill in County Court.

10. What is your vision for the future of our judicial system? What changes would you advocate and why?

The Judicial Canons do not allow us to advocate changes, but I would support changes that put in place programs to assist the mentally ill before they are placed in jail. A system that had immediate resources for the Defendant and the Defendant's family members. We currently are reactive rather than proactive to the situation. I believe that getting jurors to respond to the juror summons is as much education as to their civic duty and our need, as it is economic. In a perfect world jury service would not mean losing your paycheck for any juror. I would like to see more education included in high school government classes on jury service and how crucial it is to respond to the summons. Our judicial system will not function without our citizens. Finally, the current pandemic has taught me a lot about the programs available to assist the court in carrying out its primary objective. While it has not always gone smoothly, we are learning as a legal community to embrace new ways of getting the work done. This will need to be mandatory training for every new judge. We need to be prepared for the next crisis.