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TRIBUTES TO CHIEF JUDGE SHARION AYCOCK

*The Honorable James D. Maxwell II**

Congratulations to my friend Sharion Aycock on her service as Chief Judge of the Northern District of Mississippi. I first met then “Circuit Judge” Aycock around 2006. She was a relatively new state-court judge being considered for a federal judgeship. One of my colleagues at the U.S. Attorney’s Office had previously worked with her. He told me, “she had a lot of common sense, was a good person, and was pretty normal for a judge.” He also said, “she is pretty tough but has a sense of humor and is very tall. You’re really going to like her.” I met her a few weeks later at a Tupelo “Surf and Turf” dinner with her husband Randy, who is a dead ringer for Tom Selleck in *Magnum PI* (minus the short shorts, Oahu estate, and Ferrari). And my buddy was right on. Judge Aycock was obviously smart, very normal, tall, and a heck of a lot of fun to be around. So was Randy. I knew immediately she was an excellent pick and would shine on the federal bench. And she has.

I only appeared before Judge Aycock a handful of times before leaving the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Mississippi Court of Appeals. But each time, I was impressed. She has a noticeable presence and a great courtroom demeanor. And her thorough preparation and command of her courtroom stood out. So did her big and somewhat mischievous smile, which was typically a kind, welcoming gesture, though occasionally she’d bait you. She let lawyers try their cases but didn’t put up with any foolishness. She was also consistent, was not afraid to admit when she was unfamiliar with something, and she listened—all traits that trial lawyers want in a judge.

It’s no secret that from day one, Judge Aycock earned the federal family’s respect, not because of her position, but because of the person she is. She is genuine, and people recognize that. As to her judicial career and reputation, she has been a tremendous jurist by any measure. And as Chief Judge, she has always put the district first while herding some pretty wild cats. She has pushed successfully for better facilities, ushered in various

* Justice James D. Maxwell II joined the Mississippi Supreme Court in 2016. He previously served as a Mississippi Court of Appeals Judge and before that as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Northern District of Mississippi. He also practiced civil law. Justice Maxwell received both his undergraduate degree and juris doctorate from the University of Mississippi.

district-wide innovations, and even secured a new courthouse. As one of our late but dear friends might have said — “she always conducts herself in a way that reflects credit on the district and judiciary.” My wife Mindy and I have been blessed to call Judge Aycock and Randy friends for the past fifteen years and are proud of her many accomplishments. Congratulations, Judge Aycock, on your tenure as Chief Judge.

*The Honorable Jacqueline E. Mask**

I am delighted and honored to be given the opportunity to be a part of this tribute to my friend Chief Judge Sharion Aycock.

I met Sharion at a docket call in the Itawamba County Courthouse in 1982. I was newly admitted to the bar and had just opened my practice. Her calm, her confidence, and her courage in handling her cases and interacting with others in the courtroom immediately impressed me. That meeting was the beginning of a wonderful friendship that grew through the years. We have laughed, cried, celebrated, prayed, strategized, and enjoyed life together.

Our paths took similar routes in being elected as trial court judges. In 1998, I began a campaign to be elected as chancery court judge in the First Chancery Court District, including Alcorn, Itawamba, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tishomingo, and Union Counties. Sharion encouraged me, supported me, and mentored me through the challenge of the 11-month campaign. I was elected and took office in January 1999 as the first female chancery court judge for the district. In the next election, Sharion ran for and was elected as the first female judge of the First Circuit Court District, including Alcorn, Itawamba, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc, Prentiss, and Tishomingo Counties. We were both re-elected in 2006. It was amazing to me that people frequently got us confused. I would be campaigning somewhere and be called “Sharion Aycock.” She shared that she was often referred to as “Jacqueline Mask.” (For those who may not know me, Judge Aycock is tall, thin, attractive, and I am short.... You get the picture?).

After the election, we often attended conferences together, most often the Evelyn Gandy Lecture Series. Many times we served on the same discussion panel. Judge Aycock was always well-prepared, well-informed, and available to speak afterward to anyone interested in meeting her.

* Jacqueline Mask has served as Chancellor in the First Chancery Court District since 1999. She received her undergraduate degree from Mississippi University for Women and her law degree from the University of Mississippi. She was honored to receive the Mississippi Bar Women in the Profession Committee’s Susie Blue Buchanan Award in 2014, and the Mississippi Bar’s Judicial Excellence Award in 2017. She is also currently serving as co-chair of the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission.

In 2007, President Bush nominated Judge Aycock to serve on the federal bench and was confirmed by the United States Senate. Her new job as federal court judge took her in a different direction, but even if a year or two has gone by, we can pick up our conversation as if we had just talked yesterday or every day. Her thoughtful consideration and well-reasoned advice will always be treasured. She has been a true blessing to my life.

Neither her election as a circuit court judge nor her appointment to the federal court bench changed who she is. She is still Sharion.

She continues to be a person of character, integrity, and hard-work ethic. She has a servant's heart. She will roll up her sleeves and get the job done, no matter how difficult or voluminous the job may be. (She is also excellent at moving furniture and decorating and will do so on short notice.)

She is encouraging and supportive. She genuinely cares and is concerned about people. She is community-minded and is dedicated to family (especially her sweet husband Randy, who is always by her side, facilitating her success) and friends (like me).

Put all these traits together, and you have a tremendous judge that gets the job done and done well. While all the words used to describe Judge Aycock in this tribute are true, they still fall short of the entire package. Not only is she all these things, but so much more. Those of us who know her understand. Those who don't will understand the moment they meet her. It is a rare combination, and we are blessed in the Northern District to have Judge Aycock.

*Daniel R. McKittrick**

As the former Chief of U.S. Probation and current U.S. Marshal in the Northern District of Mississippi, I have had one of the better seats in the house when it comes to Chief Judge Aycock's time on the Federal bench.

I recall fourteen years ago, Michael East and myself, conducting U.S. Sentencing Commission guidelines training with Judge Aycock as part of her orientation. When we got to the section on guideline departures, she instructed us to skip the section on downward departures and teach her how to make upward departures. She said if she ever needed a downward departure she would get back with us at that time.

* Danny is the U.S. Marshal for the Northern District of Mississippi. Prior to his appointment he was the Chief of U.S. Probation and Pre-Trial Services for 10 years and an officer with the court for a total of 26 years. He is a graduate of The Federal Judicial Centers, Leadership Development Program, and served as Adjunct Faculty Member at the Judicial Center from 1994 to 2004. He also represented the Fifth Circuit on the Chief's Advisory Group advising the Administrative Office and the Judicial Center with policy recommendations. Danny is a 1977 graduate of Mississippi College.

It didn't take very long for Judge Aycock to understand she had options available to her in the Federal court that simply don't exist in Mississippi's Circuit court system. For example, pre-trial services and supervision that give the court time to evaluate the defendant's conduct while out on bond supervision, money for mental health evaluations, in-patient drug treatment, and smaller caseloads for pre and post-conviction supervision. It wasn't long before she was traveling with me across the country to re-entry conferences and training programs and conferring with her old friend, U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett. We brought in subject matter experts for conferences within our District and invited our other judges, U.S. Attorney's office, Federal Public Defenders, CJA Panel attorneys, and of course, all of U.S. Probation. She started our first re-entry program in December 2015. I recall our first re-entry graduation being a very emotional experience for everyone involved, particularly for those graduating from the program. As we were leaving the ceremony, Assistant U.S. Attorney Bob Norman came up to me and said, "you know, there really is a place for this program in our system." For those of you that know Bob, that was a watershed moment in our court's history.

Now before you go and start thinking Judge Aycock turned into a "softy," think again. She also began holding monthly show cause proceedings for the collection of fines and restitution. We may be the only Federal court in the country with such a program. To this date, approximately \$500,000 in fines and restitution has been collected through her efforts.

Upon becoming Chief Judge, she formed the roundtable working group, which meets once or twice annually. The sole purpose of this group is process improvement. Every office has a place at the table, clerks, courtroom deputies, Magistrate judges, docket clerks, U.S. Marshals, U.S. Attorney, Federal Public defenders, CJA panel, GSA, building security, U.S. Probation, Court Security Officers. Every office or person that has any impact on the court's operation is at those meetings and has a voice.

I began my career in 1977 in the Hinds County Youth Court. My judges were Carl Guernsey, Reuben Anderson, and L. Breland Hilburn, and forty-four years later, I've seen my share come and go. In my opinion, the quality that sets the great ones apart is they never stop learning. She is genuinely one of the great ones, and I'm proud to call her my friend.