

Judicial Profile-Catherine Brunson

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In his historic January 8, 1964 message to Congress, Lyndon Johnson said: "this administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America!" It was argued this was not only morally sound, but good economics for the country. Suddenly, there were at least 200 new anti-poverty federal programs. Age discrimination, public health, clean air, civil rights, food stamps, voting rights, housing, mass transit; the list is endless. These programs reached into Northern Florida. Of particular importance to Judge Brunson was the Student Loan, and Aid to Higher Education Acts. She was graduating from Leon High School in Tallahassee at that time.

Catherine's mother was raised in a cross-roads town near Tallahassee. As head of the household, with a 5th or 6th grade education, she moved into town to earn a living to raise her children. finding a job as a cook in a drug store, she "had a dream." She wanted her GED. She started attending adult education night classes. Her attitude must have instilled a vision of education in her children. Catherine became a voracious reader. But how to go to college? No family funds were available; "I didn't have a rich grandfather."

In her educational applications she described herself as a "disadvantaged minority." She was probably one of the youngsters President Johnson had in mind. The summer before college, she was selected and studying at Yale University in New Haven in an enrichment program. Then student loans, and "Horizon's Limited" put her through Florida State (in 1972). She could have stayed at home, but lived in the dorm. a waiver of tuition, loans, and fellowships put her through law school (in 1974) at FSU.

After passing the Bar, she had a series of interesting jobs. Assistant Public Defender in Pensacola, Counsel to the State Retirement Commission in Tallahassee, a stint in private practice in Belle Glade with Tom Montgomery. Then, seven years as Assistant County Attorney working with Human Services. This was working with many Federal programs, including summer jobs for the disadvantaged, Head Start, housing, indigent burials, and a multitude of other Great Society programs. then, she went into her own private law practice in Delray Beach. Ten years later, she grew tired of commuting to her general law practice in Delray. She bought a two story house on 9th street in West Palm Beach for her office. There, she concentrated on probate and guardianship cases. Along the way, she found time to serve on the Delray and County Building Code Boards, and as an Adjunct Professor of local government law at Nova University.

her goal in the law had been to become a Judge. She applied for an appointment in 1970, 1986, and four times in 1993 (she is still a runner-up to John Hoy). Selected by Governor Chiles, she immediately found herself in a hotly contested election in September, and a run-off in November. We followed this election closely in the newspaper. Suffice it to say, our newest Judge is glad the election is over.

Catherine has not neglected her family. Her mother (82) came down from Tallahassee to help her when Jerome was born 14 years ago. Her mother never left. The

Judge has an even newer addition to the family (with husband Berris): “Terrible Two” Daniel.

For non-work activities, there is Berris, Daniel, her mother, reading late at night, walking, and bicycling. And the church, in which she is a leader. One senses right away her deep Christian religious conviction. “It’s helped me over some very rough times.”

Judge Brunson epitomizes the young person Lyndon Johnson must have been looking for in his anti-poverty programs. A young, intelligent, self-sufficient “disadvantaged minority.” She was able to understand and take advantage of educational programs made available to her.

She gives a lot of credit to her mother. “My mother was a major influence in my life. She was always there for me.” One must certainly revere a lady who came from a humble experience, attended adult night classes, and instilled in her daughter a love for reading, education, and religion. Whatever her mother learned in her lifetime, she learned well, and passed it on to her daughter.