

INTRODUCING THE HON. MARGARET C. "CASEY" RODGERS U.S. DISTRICT COURT OF FLORIDA, NORTHERN DISTRICT

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On November 24, 2003, the panhandle had the privilege of seeing one of its "own" being elevated to the federal bench. On that date, Margaret C. "Casey" Rodgers was appointed by President George W. Bush to serve in the Northern District of Florida. Her selection distinguished her in many ways, making her one of the youngest sitting federal judges and the only female federal judge in the history of the Northern District of Florida. It also marked the culmination of a dream that started many years ago, when her grandmother was a judicial secretary in Ft. Lauderdale.

Even as a child, listening to her grandmother's explanations of court proceedings and legal history, Judge Rodgers knew she wanted to study law. Later, when seeing firsthand the courtroom skills and brilliant closing arguments of a close family friend, the late Lefferts Mabie, Jr., she was inspired to make a serious commitment to law as a career.

Judge Rodgers attended college in Pensacola, at the University of West Florida. She went to law school at California Western School of Law. She was an outstanding student and was granted an externship with the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the Honorable David R. Thompson. She became fascinated with the judicial system at that time. Later, after completing law school, she was selected to serve as law clerk to the Honorable Lacey Collier, a federal district court judge in the Northern District of Florida.

She had many opportunities during her approximately two and one-half year clerkship to see first-hand how the federal court system operated. She enjoyed seeing the skilled attorneys present their cases. She also realized that the system had a number of components essential to its success: the leadership of the judges, the dedication of the staff and courthouse personnel and the outstanding preparation by the litigants appearing in court.

Her experiences in federal court, as both a student and clerk, were positive and challenging ones. She says that Judge Collier was not only an excellent mentor and teacher, but also an honorable and good judge. In large part, she credits her desire to pursue a judicial position to the experiences she had during her clerkship.

Judge Rodgers was engaged in private practice in Pensacola for approximately eight and one-half years following the clerkship with Judge Collier. She had a civil trial practice and also served as in-house counsel for a

large multi-specialty medical practice. As a lawyer, she always appreciated judges who treated her clients politely and with respect, without regard to their status in a given case. She has tried to do the same since her appointment to the bench.

Judge Rodgers was thrilled to learn that she was appointed to a very important position in the Northern District of Florida in 2002. In May of that year, she became a Federal Magistrate Judge. Because of her general knowledge of federal courts and her specific knowledge of the Northern District, her transition to the Magistrate position was a relatively smooth one.

Just 18 months after her appointment, she received word that she was President Bush's choice to fill the vacancy created by Judge Lacey Collier's departure from the federal bench.¹ She was humbled by the President's endorsement and by the support the community exhibited. She was recently confirmed and sworn in as federal judge. She will handle more cases and different types of cases, as a federal judge. She will also have full responsibility for the criminal docket in Panama City, Florida. Her position will require more travel as well.

Despite the significant job demands, which she expects and welcomes, her job actually permits greater latitude with scheduling than she had when she was in private practice. The flexibility is appreciated by Judge Rodgers and her young daughters, Maggie (11) and Hannah (9). The judge arranges her schedule in such a manner that she can participate in the children's school and other activities and maintain her active workload as well. She hopes to show her daughters by example that hard work brings its own rewards and to also instill in them that even dreams which seem remote can be achieved.

Recognizing what a federal judge is supposed to do is fairly straight-forward. However, living that role can be much more difficult than it seems at first glance. All of us are affected by the actions of others. We form negative opinions when others are disrespectful, sloppy, angry or hurtful. We relate more to those who share our views and values. Yet, we expect and demand that our judiciary not be affected by normal human emotions in the conduct of its business. When we achieve a fair and impartial judiciary, individuals who can literally divorce themselves of personal thoughts and feelings while "on the job," it is a cause for recognition and celebration.

Judge Rodgers has an absolute commitment to make her best efforts to fulfill the role that she believes she is required to fill as a federal judge: to apply the law as set forth in federal statutes and the United States Constitution and as interpreted by the United States Supreme Court and the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals. She recognizes that federal judges are neither omnipotent nor infallible, and she expects to continue growing and learning as a student of the law throughout her professional career as a member of the judiciary. She will aspire to be both fair and impartial in all her dealings with litigants.

She candidly acknowledges that she saw examples in private practice of people thinking or feeling negatively about federal court: people perceived that a federal forum was inherently a hostile forum. She plans to work to dispel that notion. The most beneficial thing that attorneys can contribute to making a forum fair and impartial is to fully prepare their cases; the most harmful thing that attorneys can do to harm the goal of a fair and impartial determination of a case is to attempt to win at all costs. Judge Rodgers is passionate in her commitment to our American system of justice. She believes in the trial system and appellate system as they exist today. She considers that we have sound checks and balances in place. She wants litigants to recognize the integrity and efficiency of the system and to better understand the benefits of the federal court system.

We congratulate Judge Rodgers on all of her accomplishments. She will undoubtedly bring to this position the confidence, strong work ethic, excellent preparation and solid ethics which she exhibited in private practice. The people in the Northern District and all of Florida are honored to have her serve as one of our federal court judges.

¹Judge Collier assumed senior status with the Court and will continue being involved in judicial matters in the Northern District.