

TRI-STATE DEFENDER

A REAL TIMES NEWSPAPER

The Mid-South's Best Alternative Newspaper

Lee Wilson

BACKGROUND FOR CANDIDATES QUESTIONNAIRE

We have established a questionnaire/interview process in which we will invite candidates to participate as a way to gather both objective and subjective information. This information will be synthesized and used in the selection of the candidates we choose to endorse. As a multi-media outlet with a primary focus on the African-American community, we've established criterion by which we will select the candidates for endorsement. The process of setting the criterion began with a critical analysis of the current state of African Americans in Memphis.

A brief statistical and empirical journey revealed the following:

- According to the 2000 Census, Memphis had the 8th largest African-American population percentage-wise at 61.9 percent, representing 402,367 people.
- According to the 1997 Census data, there were 10,931 black-owned businesses in Memphis and of that number only 1,335 had paid employees. Among those 1,335 businesses, average annual revenues were \$357,000 in contrast to average annual sales for white-owned firms (with employees) of \$4,818,000. Among the total number of black-owned firms, average revenues were only \$64,000 per year. More importantly, the total amount of revenues attributed to black-owned business was less than one-tenth of one percent of all revenues generated by all businesses in the Memphis-MSA. (That's \$705,000,000/\$90,391,440,000.)
- According to the U.S Department of Labor unemployment figures for 2009, the percentage for unemployment among African-American men in Tennessee was 20.2 percent compared with 11.1 percent for white men and 17.1 percent for Hispanic men. In some areas of Memphis it was estimated that the rate was 50 percent or more and overall the rate was approximately 30 percent.
- According to www.city-data.com, there is nearly a 30 percent poverty rate in the African-American community of Memphis, representing over 132,000 residents. There are neighborhoods where over 90 percent of the residents live at or below the nationally defined poverty rate. According to city-data statistics, there are fewer than 20,000 white residents living at or below the poverty rate and negligible numbers of other represented residents of other races.
- According to statistics released last year by Memphis City Schools, only 66.9 percent of the students are graduating, indicating a 33 percent dropout rate in a district that is over 90 percent African American. According to a 2008 report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, Memphis had the nation's highest gap in graduation rates between black males and white males, standing at 30 percent in 2005/2006.
- Significant disparities also exist in imprisonment rates, health care, crime and violence and more importantly in the availability of resources and opportunities that would open

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the door for these circumstances to begin to dynamically or even moderately shift towards more positive trends.

From our point of view candidates must intrinsically understand these dynamics and how they impact the welfare of our entire city. We will endorse candidates- regardless of race or party affiliation- that represent the best vision, that can present solution-oriented plans of action, and exhibit the best ability to execute and deliver on their plans to address the issues and disparities facing the citizens of Memphis.

We understand that the issues that exist in Memphis and Shelby County are broad and complex. We know that each candidate must serve and govern in the interest of all voters. However, also our contention that understanding the severity and significance of the issues confronting black Memphis – and working to address those issues – will not only serve to uplift the African-American population of Memphis, but in doing so will improve the quality of life for all Memphians, hopefully allowing us to ultimately and truly be “One Memphis.”

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**CANDIDATES QUESTIONNAIRE-Judge Lee Wilson, Shelby County General Sessions
Criminal Court, Division 10**

Vision and Plans

What is your vision for Memphis?

I am a native of the Memphis metropolitan area with family ties to the community. I also attended college at Morehouse College in Atlanta. I have always been impressed about the progressiveness of the black community in Atlanta and the perception of better cooperation between the black and white communities. My vision of Memphis is that both communities can work together in a collaborative manner. Such cooperation will be beneficial to the community at large. I believe that when we help the poorest individuals in our community and help them to achieve a higher educational level and standard of living; we have improved the standards for future generations. In the end, we have made our city a better place with more educated and productive citizens. Through this effort we reduce crime rates, improve employment opportunities, attract businesses to our city, safety for all citizens, grow our economy, etc.

*What is your approach, platform or plan of action for the office that you are seeking?
What do you want to ACCOMPLISH while in office and what problems must be addressed in order to achieve those goals and objectives?*

The Domestic Violence Court was recently established in September 2009 by the State Legislature. Therefore, my number one priority is to continue to establish a firm foundation for this court to be successful. I will do this by:

- Educating the public of the existence and the role of the Domestic Violence Court through town hall forums and other venues
- Seeking other community and governmental programs that should be part of the system and incorporate them into the Court
- Bringing consistency to the prosecution of domestic violence cases by trying every case by the same rule of law
- Using all available resources to reduce the recidivism rate
- Making our court a model court for domestic violence for the State of Tennessee
- Continuing to work towards establishing a unified domestic violence court (a court which can hear all criminal and civil matters pertaining to a family; i.e. divorce, alimony, orders of protection, domestic violence, child support and custody)

The major problem I see is overcoming the taboo and perception that Domestic Violence is something victims have to keep a secret; and for victims to not feel isolated and without hope. I want to use the court to get the message out that domestic violence is a crime and it will not be tolerated in our City. We need more support groups and emergency housing for victims. We also need more mentors and support groups for abusers so that we can provide the means to help these individuals who want to change and improve their lives and their families. A large

segment of the cases in my court, involve minorities. Therefore, I will continue to seek out programs that specifically address the problems that minorities face. This will reduce the recidivism rate of minorities and the community as a whole.

How do you plan to address the challenges and disparities listed in the background section of this questionnaire through the office you desire to hold?

I believe there is bias in the judicial system. I feel that there is bias against the poor, uneducated and minorities. My judicial philosophy is that every litigant or witness that comes before me will be treated with the same level of respect, regardless of social or economic status. I will make sure there is no bias against the poor, uneducated and minorities. I try every case as fairly and impartially as I can. I make sure that everyone understands their rights and have access to competent representation. My 27 years of practicing law and serving as both a Prosecutor and Defense Attorney has given me an appreciation for our legal system. This has translated into a comprehensive legal background which allows me to hear cases fairly and impartially without any sympathy, bias or prejudice.

As you so clearly addressed in the background section of this questionnaire, there is a disparity between the black and white communities. The black and poor citizens have unique issues and challenges that must be addressed by this city. I will address these issues through my attentiveness and sensitivity to the needs of individuals that come to my Court. I must also address this as an advocate for better resources through my community involvement, governmental involvement and involvement through support groups and agencies that provide services to citizens in some of our poorest zip codes. In spite of the challenges Memphis faces, I still believe that we can be One Memphis.

Qualifications and Experience

Why are you running for elected office?

I am the current Judge of Shelby County General Sessions Criminal Court, Division 10, Domestic Violence Court. I am running to retain my seat.

Early in my legal career, as a Prosecutor with the District Attorney's Office, I prosecuted hundreds of domestic violence cases. In the prosecution of these cases, I counseled and interviewed numerous victims. I was always sensitive to the unique problems which minorities faced in the prosecution of these cases. Through those interviews, I gained a thorough understanding of the victim's perspective and what they expected from the legal system. Later in my legal career as a Defense Attorney, I likewise counseled and interviewed many defendants charged with domestic violence. I gained a thorough understanding of the thought processes of the defendants and what they expected from the legal system. Having seen both sides of domestic violence gives me a unique working knowledge which I draw from every day on the bench. This has also equipped me with the requisite judicial temperament for this position.

What makes you qualified for holding the office you are seeking? What previous experience lends itself to success in the office?

I am currently the Judge in Division 10, General Sessions Criminal Court. Since becoming a Judge in 2009, I graduated from the National Judicial Institute on Domestic Violence. As part of a team, I toured and benchmarked with the Domestic Violence Courts in New York City, The Bronx and Brooklyn. This team included representatives from the District Attorney's Office, Public Defenders Office, County Board of Commissioners, Memphis Area Legal Services, Memphis Area Women's Council, Shelby County Sheriff's Office, Memphis Police Department and Shelby County General Sessions Court Clerk's Office.

I am also a graduate of the Tennessee Judicial College. I am a member of the Domestic Violence State Coordinating Council and have attended quarterly meetings in Nashville since August 2009. As a member of the State Coordinating Council, we discuss new legislation and make sure there is uniformity across the state in the handling of domestic violence cases. New and emerging issues concerning state legislation are also discussed. I have also conducted several Domestic Violence Summits to educate the public about this court and the agencies that are available to support victims.

I possess a thorough understanding of the cycle of domestic violence; the causes of domestic violence; and the thought processes of both defendants and victims. I am patient, understanding and possess an even temperament. These are the qualities that the Judge should possess to handle domestic violence cases effectively. In addition, I have extensive criminal trial experience. I have tried 100+ jury trials. I spent (5) years as a part-time Divorce Referee for Shelby County. In that position, I held hearings to set temporary alimony and child support. A lot of these cases had a domestic violence component. As the current Judge in Domestic Violence Court, my goals are to break the cycle and create a unified family court.

My legal experience sets me apart from other candidates in this race.

- Shelby County Public Defender (1986)
- Shelby County District Attorney General Office, Assistant District Attorney General, 1986-1993 (tried 100+ cases and served on several task forces)
- Wilson & Wright Attorneys at Law, Partner, 1993-2009 (practiced Criminal Law, Personal Injury, Bankruptcy and Medical Malpractice)
- Shelby County, Part-Time Divorce Referee, 2004-2009

Who has endorsed or expressed public support for your candidacy?

To date I have received the following endorsements and/or support for my candidacy

- National Bar Association
- Memphis Bar Association (most qualified based on a survey of their members)
- Memphis Police Association
- Afro-American Police Association
- AFL-CIO

- Commercial Appeal
- City Mayor A. C. Wharton

Ability to Implement Initiatives

A clear vision and a plan for the future are important, but it means nothing if a candidate does not have the ability to get anything accomplished.

How would you address the issues identified as most critical for the city/county from the seat you are seeking?

I have roots in this community. As a Prosecutor, Defense Attorney and now a Judge, I have been very blessed with an opportunity to view our judicial system from every angle. In my tenure on the bench, I have been successful in implementing the Domestic Violence Court and getting a lot of community and government support. We all have a role to play in making our city One Memphis. My role from the bench is to provide access to the Court for all of our citizens and to treat each individual with dignity and respect. As a Judge, I also have the ability to influence my peers in the legal community and the Judiciary to also strive to make our city better. In my role, I also work with the educational community. I am also a father of a high school student, so I have a personal interest in having our city school children have the same educational opportunities as our county school system. Better education will keep our young men and women out of the court system and make them productive citizens. As a Judge, I often have an opportunity to place individuals into programs which will enable them to get their records expunged after a period of probation. I am always cognizant to using these programs when available so as not to give them criminal records which will handicap them for life. I applaud the City for the Second Chance Program, as this too will break the cycle of underemployment and unemployment for a large segment of our community.

What opportunities do you see in working with other elected officials and or with other governmental bodies in the metro area and how do you define your role in government and the overall role of government?

The County Board of Commissioners initially appointed me to the bench in January 2009. Prior to that designation of Division 10 as the Domestic Violence Court, I worked with the Shelby County Board of Commissioners and State Legislature in getting this designation approved. As part of a team, I toured and benchmarked with the Domestic Violence Courts in New York City, The Bronx and Brooklyn. This team included representatives from the District Attorney's Office, Public Defenders Office, County Board of Commissioners, Memphis Area Legal Services, Memphis Area Women's Council, Shelby County Sheriff's Office, Memphis Police Department and Shelby County General Sessions Court Clerk's Office. .

Recently, other cities have sent representatives to Memphis to view our Domestic Violence Court to gather information. This leads me to believe that we have been instrumental in establishing the Domestic Violence Court of Shelby County as a emerging model court. I have

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also worked closely with County Mayor Joe Ford for funding for this court. As a result, I have created relationships that will further assist me with being effective on the bench. I will also continue to seek out other governmental and private agencies to gain additional funding for this court.

How would you go about building consensus or support to accomplish goals or in the case of a judgeship or similar position how do you go about making your rulings/decisions?

I was raised by a modest family in Millington, TN and know firsthand the struggles of minorities and the unique problems we face. In every case that comes to my Court, I apply the law to the evidence and the facts as presented to me. I make my rulings fairly and impartially based on my 27 years of experience in the legal system. These rulings are made without bias, sympathy or prejudice. As a Judge, I have a unique opportunity to use my life experiences in these decisions as well.

Would you demonstrate the integrity and fortitude to stand on principle to accomplish an important objective despite opposition or lack of popularity for an idea? Give an example. Provide past examples of experiences you had where that was the case?

Although I have received a lot of public support for the Domestic Violence Court, I have equally faced opposition in establishing this court. However, I was asked by the County Board of Commissioners if I would accept this position if it became a Domestic Violence Court. I gave them my word that I would and I strive to do the best job possible on the bench. I have worked tirelessly to work with the supporters of this court to seek the approval of the State Legislature and stay informed of model court systems through benchmarking and my own research. There was resistance from some segments of the community who did not view domestic violence as a serious problem. However, I was able to educate a large segment of our community to the existence and the severity of this problem and gain widespread support from all segments of the community.