

Pioneering Judge, Sylvia R. Cooks, Becomes First Woman Chief Judge of Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal

On January 1, 2021, Judge Sylvia R. Cooks began her tenure as the first woman Chief Judge of the Third Circuit Court of Appeal, State of Louisiana. This first is among several of Judge Cooks' pioneering lifetime achievements which have included being the first African American to serve on the LSU Law School's Law Review, the first African American Law Clerk at the Louisiana State Supreme Court, receiving the Outstanding Clerk distinction, and the first African American Assistant District Attorney for Louisiana's Fifteenth Judicial District. Although she finds it very rewarding to be a first achiever, Judge Cooks' believes that "Opening the door to possibilities for women and minorities would be of little reward if no one else walked through it. And make no mistake, there is much yet to be done."

Along with her pioneering spirit, Judge Cooks is also an innovator. She has worked to bring about a new E-File system for the Third Circuit which began a few years ago under her initiative and leadership as the Chairwoman heading the committee developing the system. The onslaught of Covid-19 has underscored the necessity of this capability for our courts as have the recent hurricanes which devastated the area. The Court is excited to announce it is launching the E-File system on May 10, 2021.

Judge Cooks assumes her office in the aftermath of the worst hurricane disasters in recent memory. "So many homes and businesses in the Lake Charles and surrounding community have been severely damaged or destroyed. Likewise, our courthouse at the Third Circuit has suffered extensive damage. As the new Chief Judge, I feel a strong sense of respect and responsibility for the people's house, and I look forward to it and the community's rebirth. This area of Louisiana is resilient and together we will renew."

Judge Cooks has built a distinguished legal career which includes a Master of Laws in Judicial Process from the University of Virginia where she served as Vice President of her class. She currently serves as a member of the Louisiana Bar Foundation and a board member of

the Louisiana Center for Law and Civic Education (LCE), a public education partner of the Louisiana State Bar Association. She also serves as the Grants Committee Chairperson for children's legal services with the Louisiana Bar Foundation. Judge Cooks has also chaired or served as Board Liaison on numerous committees for the Bar Foundation including the Education, Nominating, Budget, Judicial Liaison, and Kid Chance committees and Acadiana Community Partnership Panel. She also served as a member of the Trial Court Committee to Review the Need for Judgeships and the Louisiana Judicial Council New Judgeship Committee. Additionally, Judge Cooks has served for several years as a member of the Louisiana State Bar Association Legislative Committee which is assigned to review proposed changes and newly proposed bills drafted by State Representatives and Senators throughout Louisiana for consideration and adoption.

Pursuing her commitment to education, Judge Cooks has made numerous appearances at public and private schools throughout the Third Circuit to encourage and stand as a shining example to all children that "regardless of their starting point allotted by chance, they can choose to, and succeed in, rising to greater heights." She often recounts to students how she went "from the cane fields of Jeanerette to the halls of LSU Law School and the State Supreme Court, even though no one around her believed an African American girl from Four Corners could possibly do such a thing."

Judge Cooks has further invested her time and talents in the community serving as a Trustee on the *Lafayette Parish Library Board* for five years, Vice-President of *LSU Minority Alumni Association*, and a member of the LSU Scholarship Committee. She has also served on the State of Louisiana's Advisory Committee for Women by special appointment of the Governor, and as a member of the Teurlings Catholic School Board.

Judge Cooks frequently appears as a panelist and lecturer for numerous legal seminars, trial advocacy workshops, and CLE programs including those sponsored by Harvard Law School, University of Virginia Law School, Western New England College School of Law,

National Bar Association (Judicial Division), Louisiana State Bar Association, Louisiana Judicial College, Louisiana Judicial Council (NBA), Third Circuit Judges Association and various Parish Bar Associations. She has served as a Louisiana Supreme Court and Appellate Court Moot Court Finals and panel member. She also served by special appointment as an Ad Hoc Judge on the Louisiana First Circuit Court of Appeal. She currently serves as copy editor on the national publication for the Council of Chief Judges for the State Courts of Appeal, headquartered in Wilmington, Delaware.

Judge Cooks was first elected in 1992 to serve on the Third Circuit Court of Appeal where she has presided for over 28 years. The Third Circuit Court of Appeal encompasses the parishes of Acadia, Allen, Avoyelles, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, Catahoula, Concordia, Evangeline, Grant, Iberia, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, LaSalle, Natchitoches, Rapides, Sabine, St. Landry, St. Martin, Vermilion and Vernon.

Judge Cooks is the mother of three children: Irvin Celestine, Jr., an Attorney; Jermaine Celestine, State of Louisiana, Department of Child and Family Services employee; and Krystal Celestine, a graduate of University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She is also a grandmother and an avid fisherman. Judge Cooks says she looks forward to serving in the people's house for the remainder of her tenure. Congratulations to Judge Cooks.