

DOLPHIN DEMOCRATS 2016 JUDICIAL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Candidate name: Abbe Sheila Rifkin Office sought: Circuit Court Judge, Group 15 Incumbent? No

Address: 1350 NW 12th Avenue, Miami, FL 33136 (office) As I am currently an Assistant State Attorney, I would prefer to keep my home address private due to obvious security concerns

Phone: 954-298-3282 Email: Abbe Rifkin@gmail.com

Website: Rifkinforjudge.com

1. Where and when did you attend law school?

I attended the University of Miami School of Law from 1978-1981, receiving my Juris Doctor on May 31, 1981.

2. How long have you been a member of the Florida Bar?

Since 1982

3. In which other states (if any) have you been admitted to the Bar?

N/A

4. Have you ever been disciplined by a state or local Bar? NO If so, explain briefly.

5. Do you have any previous experience as a judge or conducting alternative dispute resolution? No If so, specify court(s) and/or other forum and number of years.

6. Have you ever held any non-judicial elected offices? If so, please list office(s) and years served.

N/A

7. Have you ever held any non-judicial appointed offices? If so, please list office(s) and years served.

I was appointed to serve as an Assistant State Attorney, a position I have held since I was sworn into the Bar in 1982 and presently still hold.

8. Please list any awards/honors received relevant to the position you seek.

2016 Recipient, Rosemary Barkett Award, Florida Association for Women Lawyers (highest award given yearly by this organization)

Featured Panelist, Women Leaders in the Law, Broward County Bar Association, 2016

2012 Recipient, Prosecutor of the Year, Law Enforcement Officers Foundation and the Miami-Dade Chiefs of Police

2008 Recipient, Meritorious Service Award, The Florida Bar

9. Briefly describe your legal background (firms worked for, areas of expertise, etc.).

As a criminal prosecutor for the past thirty-five years, I have handled all types of felony and misdemeanor crimes. At the beginning of my service, per my request, I was assigned to the Juvenile Division for over four years, developing an expertise in the area of juvenile crime prosecution and prevention. As a prosecutor in the Felony Division, I handled all manner of felonies, from third degree felonies to Life felonies. Thereafter, for almost eight years I was assigned to the Sexual Battery/Child Abuse Unit, where I was responsible for the prosecution of child rapists, child abusers, child molesters, and serial rapists. I chose to return to the general Felony Division, and from 1993 to 1999 I was a Division Chief, responsible for the supervision of junior lawyers in my division, and for the prosecution of homicides and major felonies that were assigned to my particular division within the Felony Division. Since 1999, I have been a Deputy Chief of the Felony Division, assisting in the supervision of the entire Felony Division in our office. This position carries with it the enormous responsibility of case filing determinations, minimum mandatory waiver decisions, plea offers, meetings with next-of-kin and interested citizens in the community, attorney and witness complaint resolution, and trial strategy staffings and the sharing of legal opinions with the attorneys under my supervision. In addition to my administrative duties, I am a Senior Trial Counsel, responsible for the prosecution of capital felonies and any companion cases that could be considered in aggravation towards the death penalty. In addition, I prosecute many non-capital cases involving either high profile defendants or cases with high media and/or community interest. Most of my cases involve complex litigation issues; for example, I have developed an expertise in prosecuting homicides that are circumstantial in nature and where the body of the deceased has not been located.

Secondly, because of my expertise in handling sexual battery and child abuse cases, I was appointed by the State Attorney as Chief of the Sexually Violent Predator Unit (commonly referred to as the Jimmy Ryce Unit, for the child victim in whose memory the law was named). The focus of this unit is the civil commitment of violent sex offenders who have completed their prison sentences but are in need of treatment. Civil commitment is the vehicle for the continued detention and involuntary commitment of those dangerous inmates designated and found to be violent sexual predators under Florida Statute Chapter 394. As such, the litigation of these cases has given me the unique opportunity to prepare and try civil cases, something most criminal practitioners rarely get the chance to do. As the Division Chief, it is my job to supervise the two attorneys assigned to handle the cases, as well as the paralegal who assists with the trial preparation. In addition to hands on assistance in the civil trials of these matters, I discuss strategy and case viability with the assigned prosecutors and give the ultimate approval to plea resolutions and the rare involuntary commitment petition dismissals.

Finally, I have been an Adjunct Professor of Law at Florida International University since 2008. I teach Trial Advocacy each semester to second and third year law students.

10. Briefly describe any professional legal experience you have had with civil rights issues.

Since the focus of my career has been criminal prosecution, I have not participated directly in civil rights litigation. However, many of my cases involve hate crimes; as such I have some experience in this area dealing with hate crimes (gender, racial, and homosexually directed) in the criminal arena.

11. Please list the professional, community, social, and religious organizations of which you are now or have been a member in the past ten years.

Community:

Temple Beth Emet, Cooper City, Florida, 1990-present
President, Sisterhood, 1996-2000
Board of Directors, 1994-2000
Featured Soloist, Temple Beth Emet Choir, 1991-present
Mitzvah Day, participant and team leader, 2001-present
United Cerebral Palsy, 2001-present
Nosh Fest, participant, 2009-present

Habitat for Humanity (participant with Broward County Women Lawyers)
PACE Center for Girls (participant with Broward County Women Lawyers)

Legal:

South Broward Bar Association, Member since 2011
President, 2016-present
Vice President, 2015-2016
Secretary, 2014-2015
Board of Directors, 2012-present
Broward County Women Lawyers Association, Member since 2011
Board of Directors, 2012-present
Chapter Representative, 2015-present
Broward County Bar Association, Member, 2013-present
Broward County Justice Association, Participant 2013-present
B'nai Brith Justice Unit, Member, 2014-present

12. Briefly describe any personal experiences you have had with GLBT friends or relatives.

I have many friends and relatives who are openly gay and lesbian. One friend, in particular, is one of my closest dearest friends; I am honored to know her. Things have definitely come a long way since we began our friendship. We met when she was a Homicide detective and I was the prosecutor on one of her cases. We worked together,

side by side, day by day, hours on end to bring to justice a man who had viciously killed his wife for his own selfish gain. I learned about her struggles to be accepted, not only as a woman, but as a proud lesbian. Her commitment to being true to herself made me so proud to be her friend. I would cringe when people would hint that maybe we shouldn't travel together on business, because maybe "people would get the wrong impression." Dealing with that kind of bigotry could not be done without some finesse, and I found myself gritting my teeth in trying to overcome the ignorance. My friend fell in love 19 years ago with the love of her life; they married as soon as they legally could, and have been blissfully happy ever since. I consider these two women family, and I know they consider me the same. I was honored to sing at the wedding of their son a couple of years ago, and I was touched by the acceptance they got from the parents and family of the bride as they walked him down the aisle. What I see in my visits with them and to the Pride Center (who have welcomed me with open arms as I campaign) is that love is unconditional; acceptance is a gift.

13. Briefly describe what you perceive as the greatest obstacles to justice.

The greatest obstacles to justice are ignorance, fear, and apathy. Those who are ignorant fear what they don't know and lash out. Those who fear are generally ignorant to what they don't know. Those who are apathetic don't care enough to learn. All three create a perfect storm for injustice.

14. Briefly describe what you hope to accomplish as a judge.

I have wanted to be a judge since the day I took the oath of the Florida Bar. My reason for wanting to be a judge, and for never giving up the quest is simple: I am a public servant. I was born to serve the public and give back as thanks for what this community, this state, and this country gave to me and to family members who came before me. Money has never guided me in anything I did; it's nice to have, but I've never chased the dream of being wealthy. The feeling one gets when they've served the public cannot be defined or bought; it can only be felt. Some people get satisfaction from possessions, others do not. I'm in the latter category.

It really goes back to my grandparents who did not have an easy road coming to the promised land called America. I cannot imagine the courage it took for them to do this all by themselves as mere children. Yet they constantly taught us the greatness of public service to this country, because the United States opened its arms to them and welcomed them in. The law which made this country a symbol of liberty for all was something that was so valuable that they were willing to leave everything and everyone behind to live under the umbrella of freedom. As a result, I was always taught country/community first, and that's what has carried over. I want to continue to serve my community as a judge, taking my public service to the next level.

I understand that it is a privilege to be a judge, and I will be thankful for that privilege every single day, every single hour, and every single minute should I be given the favor of being elected by the people of this county. The people of Broward County have had some unfortunately negative experiences with a few members of the bench in recent years. It would be my goal to make the citizens of Broward proud to have me as their Circuit Court judge and restore in some small part a feeling of pride in the Broward judiciary. I really do mean it when I say that I want to make public service about "service" and restore the public's faith in the judiciary and "justice for all of us." It's a concept I grew up with; it's a phrase I'd like to see become a reality again. People should be proud of their judges and their justice system. I'd like to see that again in my lifetime.

15. Briefly describe the greatest strengths you bring to the judicial role.

I understand the value of hard work and putting in the effort necessary to achieve one's goals. I was not a child of privilege, but I was lucky to grow up in an unconditionally loving home. I was taught perseverance, to work hard for what you wanted, how to cope with loss, the love of country, and unconditional fealty to the rules and the law. After my beloved father's sudden and unexpected death in my late teens, I quickly learned to be self sufficient. I worked my way through college, and worked at first one and then two jobs in law school in order to supplement my student loans and contribute to the running of our home. It was hard, but I was young and resilient, and I will be eternally grateful for the life lessons I learned. I developed a solid work ethic from this experience, and it has carried over to the way I am today. I have no doubt it will carry over to the way I conduct myself on the bench. My perspective has not only been shaped by the positive things that have occurred over the years, but also by the tragedies and the negative events that I've experienced. A close family member's bout with serious drug addiction helped me to put a human face on the devastation wrought by illegal and illicit narcotics. It also taught me to consider the totality of the circumstances in a situation, balanced against the law and keeping society safe. My sister's terminal cancer diagnosis, while devastating, gave me lessons in how to live life to the fullest, appreciate every precious moment, and, most of all, how to balance what is really important against a momentary and passing frustration. Her survival and miraculous recovery taught me about hope, and reemphasized my desire to fulfill my goal and my dream of one day becoming a judge.

It is my hope that the voters would choose me because of my experience. I believe I have the experience that a good judge needs, both in terms of years and breadth of knowledge. I've spent the last thirty-five years learning the law, learning the art of listening (yes, it really is something that takes a lot of learned skill), learning the balancing of law and fact, and learning how to look at things from a 360-degree perspective. As a parent, I know how important it is to listen to all the facts before you make up your mind. As a result of all of my years of experience, I recognize the need to not make snap decisions, but to deliberate soberly, carefully, and compassionately. I know how to deal with stress, and how to not let it interfere with my work or my family. This is the hardest job I will ever have, yet I seek it with joy. I will give my all every single day, as I have for the last thirty-five years of public service. Most importantly, I will strive to bring honor, fairness, compassion, and justice to the position I seek, and uphold the integrity of the bench.

16. Do you wish to be identified as GLBT (optional)?

No.

SUMMARY: Please briefly explain why gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender voters should support your candidacy (you may use this space for any additional comments or to further explain any responses to the above questions).

I believe the GLBT community and the community as a whole should support my candidacy because I bring experience, a wealth of knowledge, legal acumen, common sense, and a lifetime of living as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt, and friend. I understand what it's like to be an outsider (as a lawyer practicing solely in Miami-Dade but living 30+ years in Broward County, there continues to be a lot of raised eyebrows about this "Miami lawyer"); as such I embrace it as someone who brings something new and something fresh to the Broward bench. I have a keen sense of what is right and what is wrong due to my years of practice. I've been a part of the system, not watched it from afar, and I know how to bring honor and integrity to the bench. We truly need to bring service back into "public service" and understand that we work for you, the people, and not the other way around. I would be honored to be your choice.

I have signed the Broward County Statement of Ethical Campaign Practices and have attached a copy.

Signature of Candidate: _____

Date: _____

(I don't believe
this applies to
Circuit Court)

We ask that you return your completed questionnaire no later than May 1, 2016 You may return your questionnaire in any of the following ways:

- Fax to (954) 630-0830
- Scan and email to (info@dolphindems.org)
- If you have any questions or concerns, please call our google voice line at (954) 951-0830 and someone will return your call.