

Changing Children's Lives

Gilbert hopes to protect the most vulnerable, impact lives for the better.

By Angela Lutz

Growing up in Macon, Georgia, **Quintress Gilbert, '88**, wanted to be a doctor – but as an African American female living in the Deep South during the civil rights era, she wasn't encouraged to follow her passion. As a teenager, she was one of only a handful of Black students attending a formerly all-white high school, and she was told chemistry was for boys. This setback ended up changing her whole life's trajectory – and today, as a judge at the Juvenile Court of the Macon Judicial Circuit in Georgia, she calls it a blessing in disguise.

"I started thinking about how unequal everything was at the time, and I would walk down Mulberry Street where both the federal and county courthouses sit and wonder, 'What do they do in those buildings?'" Gilbert said of her formative years. "Later on I found out that's where they hold court, and I started to get the notion that maybe I should go into law."

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She went on to become the first Black female federal prosecutor in the Middle District of Georgia and later the first Black female juvenile court judge in the Macon Judicial Circuit.

"That idea of going into medicine would not have served me well anyway because I don't like the sight of blood," she laughed. "It was sort of fortuitous in a sense because of the way things turned out."

Gilbert may have found her calling in a legal career, but her journey to law school wasn't easy or straightforward. When she first applied to a school in her hometown in 1972, she received correspondence from the institution addressed to "Mr. Quintress Gilbert." When she went to tour the campus, she received even more discouraging news.

"The dean of that law school was to give me a tour of campus, and I was so excited I could hardly contain myself," she said. "I wore my Sunday best only to be told by the dean at that time that they had nothing for me there. I was devastated."

But Gilbert was determined, and she knew she had a noteworthy legacy to honor: In Savannah, Georgia, the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum is named after her grandfather, who helped elevate the civil rights movement in the state. Gilbert's mother was a nurse who had always encouraged her daughters to excel in school. Fourteen years after her initial attempt, she applied to law school again – this time at the Washburn University School of Law.

"One of the reasons I chose Washburn was because *Brown v. Board of Education* came out of Topeka," Gilbert said. "Then I came to Topeka on a visit and saw how closely it resembled my hometown of Macon. A river runs through it, and Macon has a river that runs through it as well, giving a semblance of home hundreds of miles away. Washburn really cares about its students, and they gave me a scholarship. It was a perfect match. My dream was coming to fruition."

At Washburn, she found her professors and classmates to be helpful and welcoming. She also honed her critical thinking skills using the Socratic method and even worked on a juvenile case, which she found both rewarding and challenging. As an added bonus, she discovered the law in Kansas was very similar to the law in Georgia.

Gilbert ultimately chose to work in the juvenile court system because she thought she could be more impactful in the lives of children who were still impressionable. Juvenile courts do not have a jury, and the proceedings are quasi civil and criminal.



Quintress Gilbert, '88. Photo submitted

For this reason, juvenile offenders are either adjudicated or found delinquent instead of not guilty or guilty, and they receive a disposition instead of a sentence, which might include counseling, curfews, drug treatment plans, community service, house arrest, or confinement. As in traditional courts, the results of psychological, psychiatric, and medical examinations can play a role in the outcome of a case.

“Children learn their behaviors from their surroundings, particularly from their parents and guardians, and sometimes they live in poverty and have poor familial relationships and negative friend choices and haven’t internalized the concept of boundaries,” Gilbert said. “Courts are sometimes the last resort,

and that place can reach them before they turn into hardened criminals.”

In her 23 years as a judge, Gilbert said she believes she has been successful at her primary goal: protecting vulnerable children in a just, safe, and understanding environment.

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