

Running the Courtroom

Early exposure sparks career for Mason.

By Chris Marshall

Survey any group of 13-year-olds about their dream jobs, and the responses will be all over the board. Entering their teenage years, some still hold onto hopes of becoming a professional athlete or movie star. The most ambitious set sights on something that's never been done before.

When **Rhonda Mason, '96**, was 13, there had never been a Black judge in Johnson County, Kansas. The same was still true three years ago. But Mason is one of the few who set an unprecedented path for herself in middle school, then spent the next three decades following it to fruition.

There were plenty of stops in Mason's career before she was sworn in as a Johnson County District Court judge in 2017, but the lessons she learned along the way are what turned her dream of running a courtroom into reality.

Legal Education

Mason's love of the law began at first sight, when a middle-school field trip to the Wyandotte County Courthouse provided a blueprint she never deviated from.

"I just remember the judge having a very quiet, overpowering presence, the way he spoke and had complete control of the courtroom," Mason said. "Many times, people come to court seeing the judge as the enemy or a scary figure, but at that time, I learned while the job is to enforce rules, they can also be compassionate."

In college, when many begin to face harsh realities about achieving their childhood dreams, Mason's belief she could become a judge was reinforced. After graduating from Oakwood University in Alabama, the Kansas City, Missouri, native returned to the Midwest to enroll at Washburn University School of Law School. The Law Clinic, then run by Sheila Reynolds, was especially transformational for the confidence it provided.

"I've always had such a quiet, laid-back personality, so Professor Reynolds was concerned how I would do," Mason

said of the professor who retired in 2010. "But I just went up there and did it, and she was like, 'She just did it!' She was very encouraging and impactful in my career. When you go to court, you may be scared, but you just get up there and do it."

As Mason progressed at Washburn, others on campus turned to her for guidance of their own, whether they needed it or not. A fellow Kansas Citian named **Scott Mason, '97**, who was a year behind Mason in law school and would later become her husband, frequently asked her for help, and she soon found out why.

"As it turned out, he didn't need to be tutored at all," she said. "He just wanted a way to talk to me. It was great. We still laugh about that today."

The Masons celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary on June 3. They have two boys, Brice and AJ. Scott who also graduated from Washburn Law and is now an attorney for the Olathe school district.

Professional Development

Following graduation, Mason built her case for becoming a judge by practicing in as many fields as possible. Working as a law clerk for the Hon. Thomas Newton provided firsthand guidance on how to operate a courtroom fairly and efficiently. She was a prosecutor in Jackson County, Missouri, from 1999-2003, then handled personal injury and homeowners insurance claims for Allstate until 2006.

The following three years at Foland, Wickens, Eisfelder, Roper & Hofer law firm in Kansas City, Missouri, opened her up to an even broader range of cases. For two years, she ran a private practice, Mason Law Firm, then was managing attorney for GEICO from 2011-17. Altogether, she handled cases in 57 different counties.

"I thought that path was necessary because it gave me a wide variety of experience to bring to the bench," Mason said. "All of that gave me the opportunity and the knowledge to fit in."

She was one of three finalists for a judicial position in 2014, only for then-Gov. Sam Brownback to make a different selection. The rejection hurt at the time, but even that, in retrospect, strengthened Mason's desire to push forward.

"Persistence is one of the biggest characteristics I had," she said. "Never give up and keep moving forward, no matter what happens. The first time around most definitely hurt, but I knew I had the skills to do the job."

Brownback agreed in 2017, when Mason was sworn in as a judge, the culmination of a goal she set as a 13-year-old.

The Next Goal

Three years later, the job has been everything Mason hoped for, giving her the opportunity to apply the values and lessons learned throughout her career.

"Everyone who comes into my courtroom starts on an even ground," she said. "Even if I make a decision against one party, there's no outside influence other than the law. Whether someone was successful in their claims or not, I hope they feel like they got a fair day in court."

In the United States, 73% of judges are white and 67% are male. By defying the odds, Mason hopes she projects the same sense of possibility she experienced the first time she entered a courtroom.

"I think I am a walking example that, no matter where you're at, you can do it if you put your mind to it," she said. "I reflect a portion of the community that had not been represented. The impact I may have in the courtroom is that, if this is what you want to do, you can do it."



Rhonda Mason, '96. Photo submitted