

## **Statement of Candidacy- Dana M. Bellingrath**

Dear Tenth Judicial District Colleagues,

On Friday, February 15, 2019, you have an opportunity to elect up to five nominees to be submitted to Governor Roy Cooper to fill Judge Croom's vacant Wake County District Court seat in Judicial District 10B. I am humbly requesting your vote to become at least one of those who will be submitted to the Governor for his consideration. If I were then appointed to succeed Judge Croom to as a Wake County District Court judge, I hope to be able to offer the same dedication to the members of our community, and to treat the attorneys, litigants and citizens of Wake County that may appear in my courtroom with the same compassion, fairness, and integrity as I have witnessed from Judge Croom both in and out of the courtroom.

In Hebrew, my first name, Dana, means "arbiter" (which is synonymous with "judge", according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary), so one might be able to say I was meant to become a judge since my birth. However, it is my life experiences since then, as well as my education, my years of hard work, and my professional experience, that have shaped me as a person and as a member of the legal profession, into becoming someone with the right temperament to serve the citizens of Wake County as a District Court Judge.

I am the middle child of three and a product of an acrimonious and high-conflict divorce, who spent significant portions of my younger life mediating disputes between my parents and each of my siblings. Suffice to say, maintaining relationships with both parents and avoiding bias against one over the other is something I have been tested with on a frequent basis throughout my childhood and into the present day.

My experience as a child of a high-conflict divorce led me first to pursuing an undergraduate degree in Psychology from UNC-Chapel Hill (graduating in 1998) and later, a law degree from North Carolina Central University School of Law, so that I could pursue a career in family law and eventually, become a Family Court judge in Wake County. I became licensed to practice law in North Carolina in 2009, after graduating from law school, *cum laude*, that same year, and opened my own solo practice in 2010, devoting my practice almost exclusively to family law clients.

In January 2017, I closed my firm and joined another family law firm in Wake County, Haas Tharrington, P.A., where I have continued to practice exclusively family law. One of the many reasons I joined the firm was its dedication to assisting same-sex couples both in forming new families together and helping them when their marriages or committed relationships end and the families break apart. As a long-time ally and supporter of marriage equality, I was one of the founding members of NCCU's OutLaw Alliance while in law school and served as its President from 2007 to 2009, as well as being an allied member of the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Attorneys association (NCGALA).

In my private practice I have represented clients from all walks of life, of every race, religion, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual preference. I have had clients whose religious, political and social views were vastly different from my own and have never allowed that to alter



my ability to treat them with respect and to advocate for them, in court or anywhere else. I have appeared in District Court litigating all aspects of family law matters, including child custody, child support, equitable distribution, alimony, divorce, breach of contract actions, alienation of affection and criminal conversation actions, and domestic violence under Chapter 50B. I have been a court-appointed attorney representing Defendants in Child Support Enforcement Court since 2010 and have also appeared in Juvenile Abuse, Neglect and Dependency Court on occasion.

I have dedicated a considerable amount of time over the years representing domestic violence victims as a volunteer attorney for Legal Aid via Project Together and since its founding in 2014, have served as a volunteer attorney appointed to represent either Plaintiffs or Defendants in Domestic Violence Custody Court. The purpose of this program was to address the lack of fairness and equality many defendants have in domestic violence court, particularly as it relates to their parental rights, when they lack the funds to hire counsel. I have continued to volunteer as an attorney in this program because I believe every citizen should be treated fairly by the Courts.

I have also volunteered for various community projects, such as Lawyers Read (which pairs attorneys with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders needing assistance with their reading skills), 4All, Wills for Heroes, and speaking to men and women at homeless shelters in Wake County regarding domestic violence and other family law topics and have presented at CLE's on family law topics such as child support, discovery, and domestic violence, and to newly admitted attorneys on starting a solo firm. I have just been named to the Super Lawyer's 2019 List of North Carolina "Rising Stars" in the practice area of "family law."

I am a member of the North Carolina Bar Association, where I have been a member of the Family Law Section since 2009 and where I am currently a member of the Women in the Profession Committee. I have been a contributor to the Family Law Forum summarizing North Carolina Supreme Court and Court of Appeals opinions on family law cases for the Forum. From 2010 to approximately 2013, I served as Co-Chair of the NCBA Young Lawyers Division, Domestic Issues Committee. I am also a member of the Wake County Bar Association and have served on the Swearing-In Committee for several years, am currently a member of the Wake Women Attorneys/NCAWA, and have previously been a member of the NC Advocates for Justice.

While I have never practiced criminal law or appeared in criminal court, District Court is not limited to only criminal court matters. There are many civil courtrooms that are part of the Wake County District Court, including, but not limited to those courtrooms where I have appeared and where my experience would be of value. Family law is one of the most complex areas of law because it requires knowledge and understanding of so many areas of law, such as torts, contracts, business, tax, immigration, and even criminal law, due to the intersections of these areas with family law issues. In addition, the issues parties are dealing with when they are litigating the ending of a marriage or over custody of a child, are some of the most emotionally fraught and personal for those involved. A judge presiding over matters in Domestic Violence, Child Support Enforcement, Juvenile Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency, and Family Court must be able to balance their understanding of the law with an understanding of psychology, and child development, and be able to be compassionate, unbiased, fair, and open-minded toward the litigants.

One thing I have never shied away from is hard work and this is something I have demonstrated throughout my life. A District Court judge in Family Court must be willing and able to commit to working long hours, reviewing the pleadings, the evidence, and legal research, as well as drafting orders, which oftentimes cannot be done during regular hours. Having worked nearly full time throughout my undergraduate career and full time while attending law school, and having born the responsibility of managing my case load while simultaneously running a business with little to no additional support staff for most of my first five years in private practice, I am well-versed in working long hours to get the job done and would be ready, willing and able to commit to continue working hard to keep cases I am presiding over moving forward through the court system so that the parties can resolve their disputes as quickly as possible.

On a personal level, although I was not born in North Carolina, I have lived in the Triangle since high school and have lived in Raleigh since 2003. In my spare time, I'm either making soap and bath bombs to give away as gifts or, on a nice day, am being coaxed by my husband, Todd (who is definitely NOT a lawyer) to go for a motorcycle ride along back country roads or on group rides for charitable causes.

I believe I possess the experience, integrity, professional competence, dedication to the job and willingness to work hard, and judicial temperament to serve the citizens of Wake County and fellow members of the Tenth Judicial District Bar as a District Court Judge.

I hope all of you will come out and vote on February 15<sup>th</sup>, between 8:00 am and 2:00 pm at the Wake County Justice Center and that when you do, you will honor me with one of your votes to become one of the five nominees for appointment to fill Judge Croom's vacant 10B District Court seat.

Sincerely,



Dana M. Bellingrath, Esq.