

Bernice Donald sworn in as federal appeals court judge

By Lawrence Buser

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U.S. Dist. Court Judge Bernice Donald on Thursday officially became a member of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

In a two-hour investiture ceremony at the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts, Donald was praised by fellow judges, officials, family members and friends as role model, friend of the law and dedicated public servant.

"They say the law is the only game where the best players get to sit on the bench," Memphis Mayor A C Wharton said, drawing laughter from the crowd. "Without question, Judge Donald represents the best of us. She has endeared herself to this entire community."

Donald, 60, a native of DeSoto County, was nominated for the lifetime position in December by President Barack Obama to replace Judge Ronald Gilman, 69, of Memphis who took senior status in November, a form of semiretirement.

She was confirmed by the U.S. Senate last month by a vote of 96-2.

Donald, who in 1982 was the first black woman elected judge in West Tennessee, now becomes the first black woman on the Sixth Circuit bench.

Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Tenn., called her "a woman who has broken more glass ceilings than I can imagine."

"It's wonderful to be in America, to be an American and to live in a country where anything is possible," said Donald, who credited her parents for giving her self-confidence, a desire to take risks and a curiosity and zest for life. "My mother taught me that I'm as good as anyone else and also that I am no better than anyone else. ... She taught me I should never be afraid to stand alone."

Donald earned undergraduate and law degrees from Memphis State University and worked for Memphis Area Legal Services and the Shelby County Public Defenders Office before being elected judge in General Sessions Criminal Court.

In 1988, she became a federal bankruptcy judge and in 1995 she became a U.S. District Court judge, replacing Judge Odell Horton.

The court hears about 4,400 cases a year from district trial courts and federal administrative agencies in Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio and Michigan.

The circuit's 16 judges typically hear cases in three-judge panels and is based in Cincinnati, though Donald will maintain an office in the federal building in Memphis.

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