

Clark Reaches Pinnacle as State's Top Judge

By Bill Dries

When Bill Haslam took the oath of office as governor last month, Tennessee Supreme Court Chief Justice Cornelia Clark administered the oath.

It is one of the more public parts of a critical job that has many sides and calls on many talents.

The job of chief justice comes with a two-year term, a high profile, some travel and a lot of administrative duties.

“Being the chief means you are often the primary spokesman,” said Clark, who has been head of the five-member court since September when she succeeded Memphian [Janice Holder](#). “I still have just one vote on most of our business issues along with everybody else.”

In recent years, a figurative bully pulpit has become part of the job.

The chief justice has become an influential voice for better access to justice through encouraging more pro bono work by attorneys as well as fundraising for legal aid organizations like Memphis Area Legal Services.

Holder and other chief justices have been more vocal in recent years about the need to improve access to the court system.

Clark was in Memphis this month to give the keynote address at the kickoff for the MALS 2011 fundraising effort.

The 2010 MALS effort met its six figure goal.

Last month in Nashville she also called for more attorneys across the state to commit to pro bono legal work. She said it is her top priority.

“We recognize that the court system is difficult to navigate and it’s complicated and costs money,” Clark said. “There are many, many hard-working citizens in this state, and unfortunately many people who have lost their jobs or have otherwise suffered setbacks who have legal problems, who need legal advice and who don’t have the wherewithal to get that or pay for it.”

Clark, of Franklin, Tenn., was appointed to the high court in 2005 by Gov. Phil Bredesen. Before that, she was director of the Administrative Office of the Courts, the administrative nerve center for all of the state appeals courts including the Tennessee Supreme Court.

Clark was the chief administrator officer of the state court



Clark

(Photo: Lance Murphey)

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– Cornelia A. Clark
Tn. Supreme Court Chief Justice

system from 1999 to 2005.

It is that knowledge of the court system and its place in the mechanics of state government that has fueled Clark's priority to increase access to the state's court system.

Through the post, Clark became familiar with more than how the courts operate short term and long term. She also learned how funding for the court system works as well as funding considerations that involve working with the Tennessee legislature.

She called it "a unique and very advantageous perspective."

"There are amazing resources in the state of Tennessee that can be put together to help people with legal problems," Clark said.

She cited public libraries across the state, which have hosted legal forums and provided access to computers, as well as the state's system of community colleges with buildings in 90 of the state's 95 counties.

The Benjamin Hooks Central Library hosts a regular weekend legal clinic that offers help to citizens from attorneys who volunteer part of their weekend to help untangle legal complexities or just answer questions.

Clark's path to the law was unexpected. It began after four years as a high school history and government teacher. She taught high school history and government after earning a master of arts in teaching degree from Harvard University. She earned her undergraduate degree from Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

During her time as a teacher, Clark says she saw what lawyers did and saw possibilities.

"I went to law school as an idealist wanting to figure out a way to improve my community," said Clark, a Vanderbilt University School of Law graduate. "As lawyers we have the privilege and the opportunity to do that. I never thought of myself as a judge. I don't think when you're a young lawyer starting out, you think about that."

That changed when she was appointed in 1989 to a vacancy on the trial bench.

"That's opened doors and windows for me that I never imagined," Clark said.