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## Recovered from COVID-19, Judge Melanie Bell's Message Resonates with Cautious Hope

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*by Noelle Lagueux-Alvarez*



Judge Melanie Bell has recovered from COVID-19 and has a message of hope and vigilance for everyone. Judge Bell was elected to office in 2016 and took the bench as Newton County's Probate Court Judge and Chief Magistrate Court Judge in January 2017. Never did she imagine that a pandemic would affect her so personally and professionally. She notes, "we all live in a world where we

know it's out there, but we think to ourselves it's not going to be me."

Judge Bell started to feel unwell about one week before Chief Justice Melton entered the Statewide Judicial Emergency Order, the same time that the entire state of Georgia was in full bloom thanks to warm spring temperatures. She was coughing a bit and her eyes were irritated, and she thought she was probably experiencing some seasonal allergies. On Monday, March 16th, she and her Newton County Courthouse colleagues met to discuss the impact of the statewide judicial emergency. On Tuesday, March 17th, she was not feeling well enough to go to work. By Wednesday, March 18th, she was at the ER and admitted to the hospital.

Judge Bell's initial fears were twofold. First, had she unknowingly spread the virus to family, friends, colleagues, and the public? Second, who would run the office in her absence, especially if it were to be prolonged? Thankfully, as far as she knows, she has not spread the virus to anyone. And, as a testament to the collegiality in Newton County, court operations appeared seamless to the public despite her absence largely because when she hired a full-time associate judge, she crossed trained that judge to be able to hear both probate court and magistrate court cases—a gem of a best practice.

A graduate of Mercer Law School, Bell has been an attorney for twenty years, and "grew up" in the Newton County Courthouse after clerking for a Superior Court judge and serving as an A.D.A., rising to the rank of Chief A.D.A. before taking the bench in both magistrate court and probate court.

In Georgia, our probate courts have been particularly hard hit by COVID-19. Most recently, Long County Probate Court Judge Bobby Harrison Smith had to close his chambers temporarily after a clerk tested positive for COVID-19 and the Georgia National Guard was sent to clean the Johnson County Courthouse in Wrightsville due to COVID-19 exposure. We lost Dougherty County Probate Court Judge Nancy Stephenson to COVID-19 in April, Judge Bell has suffered through the illness, and probate court judges have been sued over

suspending the issuance of new weapons carry licenses—which require in-person finger printing—allegedly in violation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. Judge Bell is proud to announce that in a single week—between Thursday, 5/14/2020, and Thursday, 5/21/2020, Newton County Probate Court issued 250 weapons carry licenses—1/3 of which were renewals and 2/3 of which were new. Judge Bell was particularly proud when a nurse who had come to court told her that “outside of the hospital, you are doing the best job” with safety precautions. Those safety precautions include:

- Bailiffs screening the public at the courthouse door
- Masks must be worn by everyone. If someone does not have a mask, the court provides one.
- Hand sanitizer is used at the courthouse door and again in the courtroom
- All surfaces are cleaned thoroughly in between “customers,” as she calls her constituents
- Court staff wears masks and plastic safety glasses

When reflecting on her experience, Judge Bell stresses how important it is to preserve both physical health and civil rights—no easy feat during a pandemic. She wants her judicial branch colleagues to know that you can do both by following the CDC guidelines and the requirements of state and local health departments.

On a personal note, Judge Bell wants others to know that the virus can present very differently case to case, and all symptoms are not universal. For instance, she never ran a fever at any point. She advises that if you suspect that you may have contracted the virus, you should act as if you have so as not to infect others until you are sure. She also wants others to know that “this is NOT a bad cold!” Judge Bell was hospitalized for four days. She suffered “incredible pain” and “unbelievably scary shortness of breath.” Thankfully, she did not need to be on a ventilator. Once at home, she quarantined upstairs while her husband remained downstairs. They used the utmost care when items such as dishes needed to be exchanged and, thankfully, he has not tested positive for the virus. She asks that we each “do our part” to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

Despite the tremendous toll this virus has taken, there are some silver linings. Judge Bell notes that this crisis has brought the judiciary together in collaboration as never before especially amongst the various classes of court. She has enjoyed discussing her court operations with judicial colleagues who were surprised to learn that our probate courts handle a very wide range of responsibilities including issuing weapons carry licenses and housing vital records.

Judge Bell is also pleased to see other judges turning to and embracing technology to keep cases moving. Judge Bell has been using technology to increase efficiency long before this pandemic hit. For over a year now, she has been using Zoom to hold hearings on first appearances and has started issuing arrest warrants via video conference as well. She hasn't had any difficulty with this process and recommends it to other judges.

Judge Bell has been appointed to the Judicial COVID-19 Task Force on which she is happy to serve and to which she will offer her unique perspective as a judge who has recovered from COVID-19.

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