

RELISHES HER NEW ROLE AS A CIRCUIT COURT JUDGE.

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# Vero Beach *Magazine*®

HOLDING COURT





*Janet Croom is the 19th Judicial Circuit's newest circuit court judge, appointed last spring.*

# HOLDING Court

JANET CROOM  
RELISHES HER NEW  
ROLE AS A CIRCUIT  
COURT JUDGE.

WRITTEN BY MARY BETH VALLAR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
GREG HILLS

**P**residing in her third-floor courtroom at the St. Lucie County Courthouse, Judge Janet Croom's petite frame seems almost dwarfed by her long, black judicial robe. But the attorneys who practice before her and the jurors who decide civil cases in her court soon understand her true stature.

Croom ascended to the bench last spring with two decades of trial experience, an impressive array of academic qualifications and a personal style that has earned the admiration of many. Her previous law partners and her former courtroom adversaries are not surprised by this reaction of attorneys and jurors, having witnessed firsthand her competence and diligence.

Appointed by Governor Rick Scott, the Vero Beach resident is the 19th Judicial Circuit's newest circuit court judge. Watching her, it's obvious that the 47-year-old Arkansas native, who admits she did not see herself in this position a mere two years ago, relishes her role. "I love the mental stimulation," she says. "Being a trial attorney for 21 years was great, and I had planned on continuing and expanding my practice of business law. But when this opportunity came up, I saw it as a new angle to experiencing the law, which I love and which is my career."

Her recruitment to the bench is not the first time she was singled out for a position. After earning her law degree from the University of Arkansas School of Law in 1994 - having graduated cum laude from the same university - she took a job as an assistant attorney general for the state of Arkansas. Two years later the Honorable Ray Thornton, a new Arkansas Supreme Court justice, sought her out to be his law clerk.

It would mean a pay cut, but she considered it "an amazing honor" and a way to gain experience at the appellate level, not knowing at the time how valuable it would be to her in her present position. "I learned the standards to which trial judges are held and what guidelines are used by appellate courts to decide whether an error has occurred in a trial court, and whether the error requires reversal or other intervention by the appellate court," she says.

Later, in private practice, the recruitment continued. When she moved to Vero Beach in 1997, she joined and later became a partner in the firm of Clem, Polackwich, Vocelle & Berg. Then in 2005 the Collins Brown Caldwell Barkett & Garavaglia wooed her. "They wanted me to help build up their litigation team and also offered me the



chance to expand my real estate practice. So that was a good transition.”

In 2014, Croom left the Collins Brown firm where she was a partner to become a sole practitioner. “I had become board certified in two different areas of law. My clients had taken me to a new level and were presenting me with some exciting real estate and business issues. So I started my own firm and was at the point where I needed to expand,” she says.

The board certifications to which she modestly refers are quite significant. She is dual board certified in construction law and business litigation by The Florida Bar. Only 512 or seven percent of Florida attorneys have attained this dual certification. Further, she is the only woman certified in a traditionally male-dominated field.

Early in her new solo practice, a group of trial attorneys approached her to ask that she apply for the upcoming vacancy on the circuit court. “They wanted a trial lawyer to be on the trial bench,” Croom explains. Basically she said, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Then others came and she reconsidered. “I looked at the judgeship as a new dimension and an opportunity for me to wrap my head around some interesting issues that I wouldn’t normally see in my business practice.” So she applied – an arduous process – and received the nod from the governor.

In making the appointment Governor Scott said, “During her more than two decades of practicing law, Janet has demonstrated a dedication to fairness and the rule of law. I am confident her experience has prepared her very well to serve honorably as a circuit court judge in the 19th Judicial Circuit.”

**T**he 19th Judicial Circuit encompasses four counties: Indian River, St. Lucie, Martin and Okeechobee. The circuit court judges rotate assignments and counties. Croom’s current assignment includes all of the civil jury trials, probate, guardianship, substance abuse and mental health cases in St. Lucie County.

In her first year she has already presided over a high-profile personal injury trial: a school bus case in which a 9-year-old boy was killed. The jury awarded a verdict of \$10 million. She has a tobacco liability case coming up and a lengthy trial is scheduled for this summer concerning a suit against a tire manufacturer for an alleged defect.

These cases represent one of two courtroom extremes for Croom. Complex cases like these are conducted by experienced trial attorneys who are masters of their craft. She notes, “While

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the subject matter is tough, it’s a joy in the legal sense to watch the exchange of these attorneys working their craft to perfection and to be a part of it.”

On the other extreme, Croom presides over cases tried by young, first-time trial attorneys who fumble to find documents during a cross-examination and offer frequent objections. Here she shows patience as she coaches and prods to move the proceedings along in as efficient a manner as possible, always mindful of the time the attorneys and jurors are devoting to the process.

Attorneys find her style accessible and non-intimidating, but she is merely “embracing who I am,” she says. “Am I firm? Yes. I am not always popular and some of the attorneys don’t like my rulings. But my job is to follow the law, not to make it. Am I sensitive to the amount of time attorneys put into their work? Absolutely. I used to be one of them and I know they work very hard. I will do whatever I can to accommodate their schedules so they can accomplish what they need to for their clients. In the end it’s always about the clients.”

**B**esides applying the law and keeping order in her courtroom, she believes her role is making sure jurors feel they are important and that serving is a worthwhile use of their time. While it is standard procedure for everyone to stand when the jurors enter and leave a courtroom, Croom is particularly gracious toward them. She always greets them with friendly smile and is lenient when it comes to ensuring their comfort.

She tells them they may bring snacks or beverages into the jury box – she buys afternoon snacks for them – and invites them to stand and stretch at will. “This is not a forced march,” she reminds them. When a prospective juror recently came forward to speak privately to her about why he felt he should be excused, Croom leaned toward him and whispered, “I hope you can someday serve on a jury. It’s a neat experience.”

Recently she received a fan letter that she treasures. It was from a juror who wrote, “Thank you for the great experience as a juror. This was the first time I was selected. ... When I receive a jury summons in the mail, I have always dreaded going. This recent experience has completely changed my mind, and now I look forward to the next time I have the opportunity to serve.” High praise, indeed.

Croom explains, “That makes me think I am doing my job, which is to educate the public that the judicial system is nothing



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to fear or to hate. We are here to help the taxpayers by moving issues along and serving on a jury is an essential part of it. So it should be a good experience.”

**W**hen discussing surprises she had encountered since joining the court, Croom admits she did not expect the volume of cases, nor in instances, their age. She says, “The sheer volume is staggering, and it is because of this that we have to keep up the pace. I try to go into the courtroom early every morning so the attorneys who are there can present their motions.”

And whenever possible, she multitasks during a trial. “Probate and guardianship cases are part of my assignment, so if there are agreed orders that are ready for me to sign, I will do that. It’s out of necessity, but I struggle with how it looks to the jury. I don’t want them to think I’m not paying attention.”

As for the age of some cases, she says, “When I came, I found cases 11 years old. I have 1,100 cases on my civil docket

and over 800 on my probate and guardianship docket. There are many reasons why cases don’t move to fruition. But the rule is if a case is without any activity in the past 10 months, we can bring it up for a hearing to show cause why it shouldn’t be dismissed. If we find there is something that should be addressed, then we need to get the case on a schedule.”

With the help of her judicial assistants, Croom has whittled away at the backlog of cases. “I have an amazing team – Barbara Huth and Charlseia Filanda – and we review 50 cases at a time and are making substantial progress in the management of old cases,” she notes.

Croom will remain in her current assignment in St. Lucie County for at least another year. “We all have an obligation to experience all the areas, which we believe makes us better judges,” she says. Besides civil cases there are family, criminal, delinquency and dependency cases. “At some point I look forward to moving to a different area, but for now I’m thrilled that I have this assignment.” ☺