

Elected to Lead

Written by Mark H. Stowers | 



Judge Gwen Thomas

The Delta is well represented by hard-working women

Photography By Matthew Wood

From all walks of life and inspired by many, ladies across the Delta are serving the public by holding local and state offices. Sunflower County Chancery Clerk and County Administrator Paula Sykes, Bolivar County and Youth Court Judge Gwendolyn Thomas and state Representative Linda Whittington of Schlater (34th district) all “migrated” to their positions from other cities and states.

Sykes came to Sunflower County after growing up in Tallahatchie County and attending Delta State University. Her first job was working for the state as an auditor, which introduced her to the fine folks of Sunflower County. She soon took a job as the county’s finance clerk and purchasing office and soon found her inspiration for political office—the late Jack Harper, the county’s former Chancery Clerk.

“He was the person that inspired me,” Sykes says. “At the time I was elected, he had served the county longer than I had lived (44 years to 39 years). He continues to be my inspiration because he trained me. He had a huge influence on who I am and what I am.”

Harper helped Sykes understand the job from his knowledge of county government and his military training that followed a chain of command.

“He taught me that you always have to make sure you have the authority,” she explains. “And that comes from the board of supervisors and the court. Mr. Harper was the supreme southern gentleman politician. He taught me to always respect the taxpayers—they come first.”

Born in Selma, Alabama, Judge Gwendolyn Thomas was the first born of nine children and attributes her current position to a man, a book and a doctor. Thomas attended Catholic schools due to the urging of Dr. Isabel Dumont and her own mother wanting her to secure a quality education. In the fifth grade, Thomas’s father, an avid reader, challenged his oldest child.

“He introduced me to *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo and told me to read it,” she recalls. “And because I loved my Dad, I did. And he said, ‘you can be a lawyer. Do you see the injustice that went on in that book?’ I said yes and he said, ‘you asked me one day why that white policeman called me a ‘boy’ when he was younger than I was and I told you that’s the way it is. But you can change things.’”

Thomas held onto those words as she entered college and then began a secretarial position at an ad agency in Cleveland, Ohio where her father had moved. His tragic death when she was only 23 reminded her of his dream for her. She soon left her job and was accepted into Howard University Law School in Washington D.C. where in her third year she met her future husband, Kenneth. She worked for Republic Steel for one year before accepting Kenneth’s marriage proposal and moving to his native Mississippi in 1978. She used her law degree to work for Sunflower and Bolivar Counties’

legal services and then served as municipal court judge from 1980 to 2002 when she was elected to her current position.

Linda Whittington never had any interest to holding a political office. But she did communicate with those who did. The late May Whittington— Linda's cousin by marriage—had held the office prior to her death and with the opening came a phone call from Rep. John Mayo, the man Linda had been “hounding” to get things done.

“I had been “sharing my views” about what he was doing and he called me to tell me the Democratic Party was interested in me running,” she explains. “And I said ‘no, no, no, no, I’m not interested.”

But Whittington had been working with a non-profit organization that helped at risk and “adjudicated” youth around Leflore County and beyond. So she reconsidered the offer thinking that with a state office she could do more to help these youth. She accepted the challenge, won the seat in 2006 after a special election and a run-off to finish the original term and then was re-elected for a full term. She will soon be running for her second full term as a state representative for the 34th district. With no intentions of office, she had no inspirations but once in the office she found co-horts to draw from.

“Representative Willie Bailey is someone I completely trust,” she says. “If there’s something I don’t understand, he will tell me the truth and not spin it.”

She also listens intently to the wisdom of State Rep. Cecil Brown and his vast CPA knowledge. “He really understands the money in the state coffers and has helped me understand where a \$5.5 billion dollar budget comes from.”

From across the Delta, these ladies continue to serve, and we are blessed for their inspirations and hard work. DBJ