

Her Honor: Packed courtroom watches as governor swears in Harrington

By Lance Coleman

Monday, June 6, 2011

Tammy Harrington took on a new title Friday, but the prosecutor-turned-judge pledged that the title she loved most was that of "Mom."

As a packed courtroom watched, Gov. Bill Haslam swore-in assistant district attorney Harrington, 41, as the new Circuit Court judge to fill the term left by the late W. Dale Young, who retired earlier this year. He died on May 21.

After being sworn in and giving thanks to everyone from Haslam, to her husband, Joe Harrington, the new judge then asked her three children -- Connor, 11, Abigail, 8, and Hayden Jane, 2 -- to step up and look around at all those gathered in the courtroom.

"This is a great accomplishment for our family," she said as they looked at the audience and those dignitaries gathered for ceremony. "As I take on this role, the role I enjoy more than any other is that of 'mom,'" she said. "You are my joy and happiness."

Gov. Haslam said Harrington is the first female judge in Blount County history. "I did not choose her because she is female," the governor said. "I appointed her because she will do a great job."

The governor said he appreciated the priority she put on being a mother and having a humble attitude. "She will always be Tammy, and she will always be a mom - that says a lot about her," he said.

The 9 a.m. ceremony was standing-room only as folks packed into the third floor courtroom where Young presided since 1986. Former District 8 State Rep. Joe McCord served as master of ceremonies and said Gov. Haslam did this judicial appointment differently than governors have done in the past.

McCord said in the past the Judicial Nominating Committee would submit three names, and the governor would simply make his pick. Instead, Haslam decided to personally interview each candidate.

"It's a very different process with Gov. Haslam," McCord said before introducing the governor.

“Joe is right,” Haslam said. “We did this differently, but I think we did it right. This is a good day. We have the chance to appoint and swear in to office someone who is a wonderful citizen. Tammy, on behalf of the State of Tennessee, we’re delighted to have you take this position,” he said.

Haslam said it was important to get the right person in the job. “It’s a critical role, and you want to get it right,” he said. “She loves this community, and the community knows and trusts her.”

Harrington took the oath of office as her husband held the Bible, and her children watched. “Thank you so much for being here,” she told everyone. “I told the governor I would not let him down, and I promise I will work hard so that he will not regret this decision.”

Harrington said the work she has accomplished as a prosecutor was due in large part to the good work of local law enforcement. She also thanked the judges present for their service on the bench throughout the years. “I have spent years trying to convince all of them on a day-to-day basis that I’m right,” she said as everyone laughed. “I appreciate what I’ve learned from them.”

Harrington talked about the late Circuit Judge W. Dale Young, who held court in the room over which she will preside. “His spirit is in this room,” she said. “He would be proud to see so many here today.”

The new judge said she chose to wear the robe Young wore when he was sworn in as circuit judge. “I promise to continue the tradition of honor and civility this court is known for,” she said.

Harrington said that when the governor interviewed her in his office in Nashville, Haslam asked tough questions, including what she had learned in her time as a prosecutor that she would use as a judge. “I said the judicial system is only as strong as its individual parts,” she said. “Blount County enjoys high standards in all the above.”

The newly sworn-in judge bragged on Blount County to the governor. “I’m sure everywhere you go, each community thinks they’re the best...we are,” she said as the audience laughed.

Harrington thanked the families of those victims of violent crimes she worked with throughout her years as a prosecutor. She said the children who were victims of crime often taught adults in court lessons. “I met children, who, through their bravery and honesty, we learned to be better people,” she said. “It has been a privilege and an honor to serve.”

The judge also thanked District Attorney General Mike Flynn. “I can never repay General Flynn. I’m moving out of the ‘House,’ but I’m only moving one floor up,” she

said.

Harrington took time to honor her husband, Joe Harrington. "I thank my husband," she said. "He is the greatest human being I know. He supports me and makes me laugh."

Harrington said she was grateful for the overwhelming turnout at her swearing-in ceremony. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "It rendered me almost speechless, which is hard to do."

The newly sworn-in judge said she is ready to run to keep her seat. "The primary will be March 6," she said. "Absolutely I will run for this seat."

Following the ceremony, folks waiting to greet Harrington and Gov. Haslam had high praise for the new judge. Joe Harrington said when his wife first told him she wanted to apply for the position, he was excited for her. "I was nervous. I wanted to see her succeed but I knew it was a very, very hard position to get, and I didn't want to see her not get it," he said.

Joe Harrington said he has only seen his wife at work a few times, and he was especially impressed with how she handled herself in front of the crowd during the swearing-in ceremony. "I knew she was talented, and I knew she was good," he said. "I just didn't know how good."

Joe Harrington, the sports technology coordinator with the University of Tennessee football team, laughed when he recalled that he was the subject of a four page-spread in the "Football Time in Tennessee" magazine on the same day his wife learned the governor was appointing her to the bench.

"I got a four page article in "Football Time in Tennessee," and that wasn't the biggest news in the family," he said.

County Mayor Ed Mitchell praised Harrington's work ethic and integrity in her time in the District Attorney's office. "This has to be one of the greatest assets we have in Blount County is this appointment," he said.

Sheriff James Berrong said, "It's great to have someone with her qualifications in that position. She's a hard worker."

Circuit Court Clerk Tom Hatcher said he wasn't surprised that Gov. Haslam appointed Harrington because of her many years of outstanding serving in the district attorney's office.

"With her morals and her family attitude, Tammy is a perfect fit for the judicial system here," he said. "Working with all of us for so many years, we know each other and have been able to work together over the past 10 years. She will be an asset to the bench."

District 8 State Sen. Doug Overbey said he appreciated the fact that Gov. Haslam noted that while Harrington was the first female judge in Blount County, he chose her because he thought she would be the best person for the job.

“Tammy accepted the appointment with grace and humility,” Overbey said. “I was moved when she called her three children to the podium and told them that they should enjoy the moment and that even though she was assuming the title of judge, the title she valued most was that of mother and wife. I thought that was a very poignant moment in the ceremony.”

Amanda Nolan served as Young’s administrative assistant and will work with Harrington. “I’m so excited to work with Judge Harrington,” Nolan said. “I think she will continue Judge Young’s kind, civil manner in court.”

Blount County Deputy Rick McNear will serve as her court officer. “I’m her bailiff,” he said. “She’s going to be great. I’ve seen her, and she’s going to be a great judge.”

Michael Fox, director of Blount County Probation Division, praised Harrington. “I think Tammy is the obvious and wonderful choice,” he said.

Jim Scully of Maryville said having Harrington as circuit judge was a good decision by the governor. “She’s a great lady, and she’ll do a great job,” he said.

Ted Boyatt, chair of the Blount County Young Republicans, praised Harrington. “I am absolutely thrilled,” he said. “It was an excellent decision by the governor.”

By the end of the afternoon, Judge Harrington had already gotten down to business. “I’ve already started. I did a criminal plea this afternoon. I’m going to do both criminal and civil cases,” she said. “Judge (David) Duggan and I will equally divide the criminal and civil matters.”

McCord closed the ceremony by joking with the sitting judges: “Your ‘Old Boys Club’ just got a touch of class,” he said.



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online