



JUDGE

Penny Brown Reynolds

Born to Inspire

As human beings many of us have a desire to be remembered. Being a good parent, child, spouse, sibling, or friend is the easiest way to leave a mark on the lives of those we love most. But it takes a unique individual to be of service to others—something The Honorable Penny Brown Reynolds has managed to accomplish not only professionally, but personally.

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Judge Penny Brown Reynolds'
photos were taken at the Georgia International
Convention Center in College Park Georgia.

A SIXTH GENERATION LOUISIANAN, JUDGE PENNY is the oldest of four sisters whose mother struggled with health issues and her fair share of hard luck. “[My mother] was a beautiful woman who loved people who were not always capable of loving her,” Judge Penny recalls. “For a while I considered her meekness and mildness as weaknesses, until I realized both were signs of character and strength. And the wisdom that I try to pass on came as a direct result of lessons she taught me.”

The sanctity of the girls’ loving, supportive home was permeated by social injustice, causing Judge Penny to become aware of the inequities around her. “I grew up where everything around me was not fair. I saw minorities being mistreated. I saw women being mistreated. I watched that kind of treatment [happen to] my own mother. I felt like the only way I could equalize my situation was through education. I may not know all of the answers, but always felt like I could think my way out of anything. And that gave me power because if I can visualize it first, I don’t care what the world says,” she attests. Initially, that image aired on her television screen in the form of Perry Mason, a show that inspired her to pursue law. “I never ever wanted to be Perry Mason, I always wanted to be the judge! But nobody looked like me and there definitely were no women [in positions of power]. So I dreamed based on where I wanted to be.”

Judge Penny sensed that this endeavor couldn’t just be about her personal aspirations, “It had to be something greater than that in order to ensure that I was a part of the arbitrating of justice.” So no, she could never be Perry Mason because he only practiced the law. Judges rule on it.

“When a person puts their mind to something, stay focused, come into an agreement with God, and know it’s about your destiny, it will happen,” the Judge asserts.

SERVING THE PEOPLE

Atlanta was considered the “land of milk and honey,” making it the perfect place for Judge Penny to not only start over, but attain her goals. “My spirit was yearning for anything that took me out of being oppressed and for me this occurred through the civil rights movement,” she explains. “You would hear these images of Atlanta and the surrounding area, what it meant for black people, and that we support each other because after all, Dr. Martin Luther King was from here.” It will be no surprise to read that she is mentored by her former pastor, Rev. Dr. Joseph E. Lowery before going on to join Ebenezer Baptist Church, where she preached her first sermon, becoming a daughter of the civil rights movement.

Ebenezer is also where she met and eventually married her best friend, The Rev. Edward S. Reynolds, who served as its associate pastor. He was also heavily involved in all things civil rights, having worked with Dr. King, Hosea Williams, and John Lewis, as well as being a

founder of the United Youth Adult Conference with his best friend, Arthur Langford. Being involved with advocating for social justice issues only fueled Judge Penny’s desire to reach the bench. “I would sit in class and read opinions handed down by other judges. Whatever the ruling was, I would always say, ‘This is how I would rule if I were the judge.’ I knew I wanted to be a judge while I sat in the classrooms in law school. I was clear on my vision,” she clarified.

In 1991, Judge Penny graduated from Georgia State University in



less than three years and acquired her law degree from its School of Law by 1994. She went on to work as a State Assistant Attorney General, only one of five African Americans at the time, straight out of law school. She served as a law clerk in the Georgia Court of Appeals and as an Assistant District Attorney. She was tapped to eventually serve in all three branches of government under both Republican and Democratic administrations. “By working as (the first African American) Chief of Staff and General Counsel for the (then) Lieutenant Governor, I played a role in making sure that legislation went through the Senate. At the executive level, I was the first African American in the history of Georgia to serve as Executive Counsel for a Georgia Governor. So by the time I made it to the judiciary, I knew better than most what my responsibilities would be having served in all three branches of government. I was offered positions at major law firms, but because my calling was to serve, I saw the honor in working in public service. I felt it was my duty.”

By the year 2000, Judge Penny’s dream was realized when she was appointed by Governor Roy Barnes, to sit on the State Court of Fulton County bench, becoming one of the youngest females to do so.

Yet despite her respect for the law, her colleagues, and appreciating the role itself, Judge Penny felt an additional calling. Wearing the robe didn’t eradicate her issues with racism, and sitting on the bench didn’t stop issues of classicism and disparity based on economics. She always felt that the law was supposed to be the great equalizer.

“In Catholic school I learned that God is a God who is equal, yet I wasn’t seeing equality,” she expressed. “I wanted to be able to show courage in my decision making, so that when people came into my courtroom they knew that if they didn’t have a chance at fairness with anybody else, they had it with me. Every time I put that robe on, it wasn’t just for me—it was for my mom and all that she had been through, for every woman that had been abused, for all those women who [chose to throw] themselves into the ocean instead of becoming enslaved. It was always bigger than just me. I felt the awesomeness of the responsibility. I followed the law no matter what I personally felt. No matter their race, everyone was treated with fairness and with respect. It was my duty and my honor.”

“I was a whole person when I earned my juris doctorate in law, but I became complete in the knowledge of who I am when I graduated from seminary. It was my place of liberation. It was my place of freedom,” she admits.

COURTING FAMILIES

Judge Penny doesn’t just make moves, she takes huge, confident, ambitious steps in the direction of her purpose. So when her mother passed at age sixty-two, Brown Reynolds seized the chance to create a better life for her family and tackle a new challenge in the television industry.

It doesn’t get any more real than court TV; no scripts or firings—just the facts, evidence, and the law. Judge Penny successfully raised the bar by delivering *Family Court with Judge Penny*, retaining ownership and control of the show while serving as Executive Producer. “I followed in the footsteps of Oprah Winfrey who taught the world the importance of owning one’s voice and brand,” she clarified.

Her Emmy nominated series literally shook the television landscape when an earthquake measuring 5.4 on the Richter scale hit during taping of the premiere episode, but to this day the syndicated series maintains a strong fan base not only in the US, but internationally as well.

“*Family Court with Judge Penny* is one of my proudest accomplishments,” she freely admits. “It’s very tricky to be able to feature children on television, but I used a mix of integrity with old fashioned wisdom as my mother would say, combined with my education and compassion. I was certainly honored to be given the opportunity to do it.”

A JUDGE WHO NEVER JUDGES

Despite her ability to make her own dreams come true, Judge Penny recognizes why it’s not that easy for others to accomplish theirs. That’s why throughout her time dispensing justice from the bench she has been serving her community front and center through the Judge Penny Brown Reynolds Foundation, Inc. and the Midway Missionary Baptist Church, pastored by she and her husband. Both

offer much needed services to underserved communities, families, and individuals such as a summer camp, after school study options, clothing closets, and resume training classes, Stop the Violence Summits, back to school events, among numerous other programs.

One of those initiatives was called *A Second Chance*, for drug addicted women who needed a hand up. “Society doesn’t give many second chances anymore. That’s why employers continue to do background checks. People are paying for a lifetime the wrongs of their pasts. Why would a person be precluded from getting a job because they have a felony on their record? For some non-violent offenders who served their sentence, whatever happened to the notion of rehabilitation? What ever happened to mercy? As a society we are so judgmental, even though most of us are one bad decision away from going to prison ourselves,” she argues in full defense lawyer mode. Via her articles, books, and annual Judge Penny’s SisterTalk conferences, she works to empower women. Her latest publication, *Real Talk For Real Sisters*, looks at the lives of twenty women from different walks of life and offers advice to those who may see themselves in their stories. “You find advice for the the ambitious woman, for the broken sister, the incarcerated sister, the disappointed woman or the controlling sister. It’s not a book you initially read from cover to cover but rather you search the contents to read the chapter that speaks to your spirit, the one you identify with, and at the end there is a place for you to write your truth,” she describes. “I know my gifting is the ability to stir something up in a person, which helps them try to figure things out for themselves. I don’t keep secrets about success, but most people do. I believe that God’s resources are unlimited, so if I give you my wisdom, that’s not going to hurt me.”

Whether from the bench or the pulpit, Judge Penny is a firm believer in the power of families and uses her knowledge, gifts, lessons, and resources to bless all who cross her path. “When the family suffers, our community suffers and so goes the world. Family is defined in different ways because it’s not always a husband and wife and a picket fence. Families consist of aunts and uncles and other relatives or friends. It is grandparents helping to raise grandchildren and neighbors watching children get off the school bus. Church is a part of the family too. And we need to do whatever we can to help build up families because when we do that, we secure the foundation of our community,” imparts the Rev. Judge Penny Brown Reynolds. “The glory goes to God, but it’s important that when I look back over my career, whether as a prosecutor, judge, minister or television personality, even now, I tried to leave things a little bit better than how I found them.”

Rev. Edward and Judge Penny are the proud parents of two adult sons, Fela and Michael, and one granddaughter, Pelly-Marie.