

**Tennessee Trial Court Vacancy Commission**  
***Application for Nomination to Judicial Office***

1/17/23

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**INTRODUCTION**

Tennessee Code Annotated section 17-4-301 et seq. charges the Trial Court Vacancy Commission with assisting the Governor and the People of Tennessee in finding and appointing the best qualified candidates for judicial offices in this State. Please consider the Commission's responsibility in answering the questions in this application questionnaire. For example, when a question asks you to "describe" certain things, please provide a description that contains relevant information about the subject of the question and, especially, that contains detailed information that demonstrates that you are qualified for the judicial office you seek. In order to properly evaluate your application, the Commission needs information about the range of your experience, the depth and breadth of your legal knowledge, and your personal traits such as integrity, fairness, and work habits.

This document is available in Microsoft Word format from the Administrative Office of the Courts (telephone 800-448-7970 or 615-741-2687; website [www.tncourts.gov](http://www.tncourts.gov)). The Commission requests that applicants obtain the Microsoft Word form and respond directly on the form. Respond in the box provided below each question. (The box will expand as you type in the document.) Review the separate instruction sheet prior to completing this document. Your complete application, including both the original and digital copies, must be received by the Administrative Office of the Courts on or before the deadline prescribed in the Notice of Vacancy. See section 1(g) of the application instructions for additional information related to hand-delivery of application packages.

THIS APPLICATION IS OPEN TO PUBLIC INSPECTION AFTER YOU SUBMIT IT.

**PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND AND WORK EXPERIENCE**

1. State your present employment.

Howser & Associates, PLLP and Simply Split Legal, PLLC

2. State the year you were licensed to practice law in Tennessee and give your Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility number.

Licensed: May 2007

TBR #00257891

3. List all states in which you have been licensed to practice law and include your bar number or identifying number for each state of admission. Indicate the date of licensure and whether the license is currently active. If not active, explain.

I have been continuously licensed in the State of Tennessee since May 2007. My status with the Board is active.

4. Have you ever been denied admission to, suspended or placed on inactive status by the Bar of any State? If so, explain. (This applies even if the denial was temporary).

No, I have never been placed on inactive status or suspended by any Bar in any state.

5. List your professional or business employment/experience since the completion of your legal education. Also include here a description of any occupation, business, or profession other than the practice of law in which you have ever been engaged (excluding military service, which is covered by a separate question).

Simply Split Legal, PLLC (Founding Member) 2019-2021, 2023 to present.

Howser & Associates, PLLP (Managing Partner), 2018 – present.

Wilson, Howser, Oliver & Turner (Partner), 2013 – 2018

Middle Tennessee State University (Adjunct Professor – Family Law), 2015-2017

Reed & Howser (Attorney), 2007 – 2013

Tennessee Judiciary/Circuit Court Judge J. Mark Rogers (Judicial Assistant/Law Clerk), 2004 – 2007

Tennessee Judiciary/Circuit Court Judge Don R. Ash (Judicial Assistant), 1999-2004

6. Describe the nature of your present law practice, listing the major areas of law in which you practice and the percentage each constitutes of your total practice.

My practice has evolved over the years but now consists primarily of domestic relations cases (90%), estates (7%), and employment (3%). I have experience in other areas of law, but these are the areas of concentration currently.

7. Describe generally your experience (over your entire time as a licensed attorney) in trial courts, appellate courts, administrative bodies, legislative or regulatory bodies, other forums, and/or transactional matters.

My legal career expands 23 years in which I have held almost every position within the judicial system except magistrate or judge. These experiences have exposed me to learning about how the system works from all aspects and I have been blessed to learn the law from some great legal scholars. During my career, I have practiced in the areas of criminal defense, conservatorships, employment law, juvenile law, and domestic relations. As my practice became more established, my practice began to migrate more toward domestic relations cases. I have challenged myself by taking on cases outside of my focus areas by relying on the knowledge of other legal professionals who were more experienced in those areas than I. I have been blessed to travel our great State and appear before Juvenile, General Sessions, Circuit and Chancery Courts in the following counties: Bedford, Cannon, Coffee, Davidson, DeKalb, Lewis, Lincoln, Rutherford, Marshall, Maury, Moore, Putnam, Sumner, Wilson, Warren, and Williamson. I have also enjoyed a modest appellate practice over the years. In giving back to my community, I taught at Middle Tennessee State University as an Adjunct Professor and served as a substitute teacher at the Nashville School of Law. I have served as a legal advisor to Representative Bryan Terry and have assisted him in drafting bills to better the lives of Tennesseans. This profession has opened doors to allow me opportunities to assist the indigent and the oppressed with their legal and life issues. Each experience has taught me something more about the law, my community, the system, and myself. I am so very thankful for it all.

8. Describe any matters of special note involving your practice in trial courts, appellate courts, and administrative bodies.

Prior to Obergefell v. Hodges, I had the opportunity to represent a woman involved in a same sex relationship who had adopted a child. The parties were not married but had a committed relationship for a lengthy period of time. I represented the legal Mother at each phase through the Court of Appeals. The legal Mother was awarded sole custody of the minor child and the Court determined her partner was not entitled to visitation with the minor child. In re: Hayden C.G.-J, M2012-02701-COA-R3-CV.

Post Obergefell, I participated in a contentious reproductive rights case wherein a biological Father's rights to a child were challenged against a same sex, married couple who had undertaken fertilization without the benefit of contract or a professional agency. The case was settled out of court after an exceptionally long and contentious litigation. In re: B.D.A. (d/o/b 09/04/2009) Rutherford County Chancery #5CV-1351

In 2016, my law partners and I filed an ouster suit against our local Sheriff. We were successful in seeking his temporary removal and after his plea of guilty to criminal charges in the Federal Court, he resigned his position, and the issue became moot. James Robert Gann, III v. Robert Arnold, Rutherford County Chancery #16CV-1500.

In 2021, a colleague and I filed an employment discrimination case and retaliatory discharge against Rutherford County, Tennessee. That case was settled through mediation for an undisclosed amount. Stephen LeQuire and Nicholas Trail v. Rutherford County, Tennessee, Rutherford County Chancery Court #21CV-368/

Also in 2021, I represented a biological mother in a paternity suit which progressed to the Court of Appeals. The Court of Appeals affirmed in part, reversed in part, and remanded finding that the trial court failed to make certain findings of fact as to abuse alleged by the Mother and that without said finding, the Court could not make a proper determination as to whether the parenting plan was in the best interest of the minor child. Samuel Friedsam, III v. Frankie Michelle Krisle, M2021-00530-COA-R3-CV

9. Describe any other legal experience, not stated above, that you would like to bring to the attention of the Commission.

In 2014 I received my Rule 31 certification, but recently did not renew it due to the time commitments of beginning my new business Simply Split Legal, PLLC. I also serve on multiple boards such as Tennessee Legal Association for Women (TLAW), Middle Tennessee Legal Association for Women (MTLAW – current president), and on a 501c3 organization Help for Nicaragua. Help for Nicaragua is an organization started by my late, dear friend Dr. John G. Pearson to assist the indigent people in the mountains of Nicaragua.

10. List and describe all prior occasions on which you have submitted an application for any

state or federal judicial position.

This makes my third application to serve in public office. In 2017, I filed an application for consideration of the Circuit Court Judgeship left vacant by the untimely passing of Judge M. Keith Siskin. In 2018, I made my second application for a new Circuit Court Judgeship created by the Legislature based upon our census and caseload. On my second attempt, I was one of three attorneys selected for consideration by the Governor. My friend and mentor, Judge Darrell Scarlett was awarded that seat.

**EDUCATION**

11. List each college, law school, and other graduate school which you have attended, including dates of attendance, degree awarded, major, any form of recognition or other aspects of your education you believe are relevant, and your reason for leaving each school if no degree was awarded.

Nashville School of Law, Nashville, Tennessee (2002 – 2006) Juris Doctorate

Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN (1989-1992) Bachelor of Science in Political Science

Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia (1986-1988). I left Liberty before graduation due to the illness and sudden death of my Father.

**PERSONAL INFORMATION**

12. State your date of birth.

██████████ 1968

13. How long have you lived continuously in the State of Tennessee?

35 years

14. How long have you lived continuously in the county where you are now living?

25 years

- 15.

16. State the county in which you are registered to vote.

Rutherford County, Tennessee

17. Describe your military service, if applicable, including branch of service, dates of active duty, rank at separation, and decorations, honors, or achievements. Please also state whether you received an honorable discharge and, if not, describe why not.

I have not had the privilege to serve in our military.

18. Have you ever pled guilty or been convicted or are now on diversion for violation of any law, regulation or ordinance other than minor traffic offenses? If so, state the approximate date, charge and disposition of the case.

I have never pled guilty, nor been convicted of, any crime other than minor traffic offenses twenty years ago.

19. To your knowledge, are you now under federal, state or local investigation for possible violation of a criminal statute or disciplinary rule? If so, give details.

I am not under investigation by any federal, state, or local agency for possible violation of a criminal statute or disciplinary rule.

20. Please identify the number of formal complaints you have responded to that were filed against you with any supervisory authority, including but not limited to a court, a board of professional responsibility, or a board of judicial conduct, alleging any breach of ethics or unprofessional conduct by you. Please provide any relevant details on any such complaint if the complaint was not dismissed by the court or board receiving the complaint. You may wish to request a report from the appropriate supervisory authority (or authorities) for a complete history.

I have received six formal complaints through the Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility during my 16 years of practice. All have been summarily dismissed except one which is still pending. Only one of those complaints originated from one of my clients, the others were made by an opposing party or an ancillary person. The pending complaint involves allegations by the opposing party that I have a conflict of interest in representing my client. The Board is investigating the complaint.

21. Has a tax lien or other collection procedure been instituted against you by federal, state, or

local authorities or creditors within the last five (5) years? If so, give details.

No.

22. Have you ever filed bankruptcy (including personally or as part of any partnership, LLC, corporation, or other business organization)?

No.

23. Have you ever been a party in any legal proceedings (including divorces, domestic proceedings, and other types of proceedings)? If so, give details including the date, court and docket number and disposition. Provide a brief description of the case. This question does not seek, and you may exclude from your response, any matter where you were involved only as a nominal party, such as if you were the trustee under a deed of trust in a foreclosure proceeding.

2002 Renee Michelle Blaylock v. William Stanley Blaylock, Rutherford County Circuit #46132, Uncontested Divorce with Children.

2005 John C. Kersey, Sr. v. John W. Bratcher, et al. Rutherford County Chancery Court #051491MI. Mr. Kersey, a disbarred attorney, presented to the Rutherford County Chancery Court seeking to review the file of a public figure. As Judge Rogers Judicial Assistant, I placed the file on the Judges desk to sign a Notice of Recusal. I received a phone call from the Chancery Court Clerk's office asking if Mr. Kersey could come to review the file. I was aware of Mr. Kersey's conduct in other places in the Judicial Building and was skeptical about him coming to the Judge's office. I asked the clerk if Mr. Kersey could come back later that afternoon to review the file once Judge had affixed his signature. Mr. Kersey was demanding to see the file immediately and I relented to the Clerk's request. I asked the Clerk to send deputies with Mr. Kersey for safety purposes. Mr. Kersey entered my office, and I handed him the file for review. I offered him a seat on the couch in my office while he reviewed the file. He insisted on standing directly behind me while he reviewed the file. I was uncomfortable with this given my knowledge of his previous behaviors. I again directed him to the couch to review the file. He then became belligerent and very loud. Judge Rogers was on the bench and the loud noise was interrupting the proceedings. The deputies then escorted him from my office without the file. Mr. Kersey filed a complaint stating that the Rutherford County Clerk and Master, his staff and I had violated the public records act. The trial court dismissed the complaint upon Summary Judgement. Mr. Kersey made an application to the Tennessee Court of Appeals and the judgment was affirmed. (M2006-01319-COA-R3-CV September 2007)

1996 Corporate Catering, Inc. v. Corporate Catering, Etc. I was CEO/President of Corporate Catering, Etc. The owner of a company named Corporate Catering, Inc. filed a common law copyright case against my company alleging infringement of common law copyright based upon similarly named menu items and the company name. After a jury trial, the Trial Judge, acting

as a 13<sup>th</sup> Juror, dismissed the complaint stating Tennessee did not recognize common law copyright and the claims asserted by the Plaintiff were ones upon which no relief could be granted. The Plaintiff filed an appeal, and the Court of Appeals affirmed the Judgement of the Trial Court. (M1997-00230-COA-R3-CV)

24. List all organizations other than professional associations to which you have belonged within the last five (5) years, including civic, charitable, religious, educational, social, and fraternal organizations. Give the titles and dates of any offices which you have held in such organizations.

Ruling Elder – First Presbyterian Church, Murfreesboro, TN (2006-Present)

Chairperson of Youth Ministries Committee, First Presbyterian Church, Murfreesboro, TN (2010-2014)

Secretary – Help for Nicaragua, a 501c3 organization (2008 – Present)

2022 Class Leadership Rutherford, Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce, Murfreesboro, TN 37130

Member – Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce (2012 – 2015) (2020-present)

Member - Tennessee Tech Parent Association (2015-2018)

Member – Bedford County Chamber of Commerce (2022 – present)

Member – Coffee County Chamber of Commerce (2022 – present)

Member – Friends of Discovery Center (2020-2021)

25. Have you ever belonged to any organization, association, club, or society which limits its membership to those of any particular race, religion, or gender? Do not include in your answer those organizations specifically formed for a religious purpose, such as churches or synagogues.

- a. If so, list such organizations and describe the basis of the membership limitation.
- b. If it is not your intention to resign from such organization(s) and withdraw from any participation in their activities should you be nominated and selected for the position for which you are applying, state your reasons.

Approximately 25 years ago, I served as a Member of the Junior League of Murfreesboro. I believe their membership is limited to women. I have not belonged to that organization for



many years but have supported their various community projects.

**ACHIEVEMENTS**

26. List all bar associations and professional societies of which you have been a member within the last ten years, including dates. Give the titles and dates of any offices which you have held in such groups. List memberships and responsibilities on any committee of professional associations which you consider significant.

Member, Tennessee Bar Association, 2007 – Present

Member, American Bar Association, 2020 – Present

Member, Rutherford/Cannon County Bar Association, 2007-Present

Member, Andrew Jackson Inn of Court, 2008 – Present

Member, Barristers Lions Club 2015-2018

President and Member, Middle Tennessee Lawyers Association for Women (2017 Member, 2023 President)

Middle Tennessee Representative, Tennessee Legal Association for Women, (2020-present)

Chairperson, Committee for Elected and Appointed Persons, Tennessee Legal Association for Women 2023

27. List honors, prizes, awards, or other forms of recognition which you have received since your graduation from law school which are directly related to professional accomplishments.

2008 Rutherford/Cannon County Bar Association Richard LaRoche Pro Bono Attorney of the Year.

28. List any public office you have held or for which you have been candidate or applicant. Include the date, the position, and whether the position was elective or appointive.

To date, I have not had the privilege to serve in nor be a candidate for public office. I have been an applicant to 2 separate vacancies in the Sixteenth Judicial District as previously referenced.

**ESSAYS/PERSONAL STATEMENTS**

29. What are your reasons for seeking this position? *(150 words or less)*

I am seeking this position because I believe I can have influence in my community and State through public service. I have always maintained an intense sense of justice and have treasured the rule of law. Devoting my life to the law and my Country, was the only option for me. At this point in my life and career, I seek to expound on the countless lessons I have learned from some of the finest jurists on the bench. I hope to honor those who have invested their knowledge, time, and energy into my career by being my best self and utilizing the many lessons imparted to me. It has been my observation that time and experience are the best teachers. As I have aged, I have embraced my numerous roles outside of being an attorney. Together, those experiences along with my personality, temperament, and legal experience have prepared me to accept this role, should I be fortunate enough to be selected.

30. Describe the judgeship you seek (i.e. geographic area, types of cases, number of judges, etc. and explain how your selection would impact the court. *(150 words or less)*

This vacancy is a civil position. With the passage of time, jury trials have become fewer. Rutherford County's population has exponentially increased over the last ten years and accordingly, the number of cases filed in this district. A substantial number of the civil cases are domestic related. In 2021-2022, the Sixteenth Judicial District disposed of 5,191 civil cases. Of those, 2,957 (57%) were domestic relations cases. Currently, there are five Circuit Court Judges and one Chancellor in the Sixteenth Judicial District. There are also four General Sessions Judges and one Juvenile Judge. Of those, only two are women and there are no minorities. I believe a Government functions best when the community can see themselves within it. I am convinced diversity in our judiciary only helps the community trust and embrace it. Given my legal and life experience; I am confident I can bring a unique perspective to the Court and serve as a role model to other young women who seek to achieve their best selves through hard work and perseverance.

31. Will you uphold the law even if you disagree with the substance of the law (e.g., statute or rule) at issue? Give an example from your experience as a licensed attorney that supports your response to this question. *(250 words or less)*

It is imperative the members of the judiciary follow the law regardless of their individual beliefs. It is the only way the citizens can hold one accountable, trust and maintain expectations of the law. There have been situations wherein I felt sympathy and compassion for a client, but the rule of law did not support their legal position. Likewise, I have advocated for clients who knew the law, understood its plain meaning, and understood it was favorable to their position. It was difficult to explain why the trial Judge did not rule in their favor on dispositive motions when the opposing party lacked standing, or the plain meaning of the law was not followed. I do not want to speak ill of a Judge or his/her decision, but it is difficult to help my clients understand

when I sometimes cannot understand it myself. In those instances, my clients have lost thousands of dollars, mental wellbeing, and trust in our system. The emotional, physical, and financial costs to these families were significant, and I have never forgotten the lesson.

**REFERENCES**

32. List five (5) persons, and their current positions and contact information, who would recommend you for the judicial position for which you are applying. Please list at least two persons who are not lawyers. Please note that the Commission or someone on its behalf may contact these persons regarding your application.

A. Kris Oliver, President, Oley, Inc. [REDACTED], Murfreesboro, TN 37130 [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

B. Dr. John Hinkle, Jr., Minister, First Presbyterian Church, [REDACTED],  
Murfreesboro, TN 37130. [REDACTED]

C. Krista Dugosh, Chief Executive/President, Fleet Feet [REDACTED]  
Murfreesboro, TN 37129, [REDACTED]

D. Mary Katharine White, Assistant District Attorney, Office of the District Attorney of the  
Twenty-First Judicial District. [REDACTED] Franklin, TN 37065, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

E. Catherine Post, Esq., Legal and Compliance Officer, Tower Community Bank, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], Monteagle, TN 37356, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

**AFFIRMATION CONCERNING APPLICATION**

Read, and if you agree to the provisions, sign the following:

I have read the foregoing questions and have answered them in good faith and as completely as my records and recollections permit. I hereby agree to be considered for nomination to the Governor for the office of Judge of the Circuit Court of the 16<sup>th</sup> Judicial District of Tennessee, and if appointed by the Governor, agree to serve that office. In the event any changes occur between the time this application is filed and the public hearing, I hereby agree to file an amended questionnaire with the Administrative Office of the Courts for distribution to the Commission members.

I understand that the information provided in this questionnaire shall be open to public inspection upon filing with the Administrative Office of the Courts and that the Commission may publicize the names of persons who apply for nomination and the names of those persons the Commission nominates to the Governor for the judicial vacancy in question.

Dated: July 25, 2023.

*R. Michelle Howser*

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Signature

When completed, return this questionnaire to John Jefferson at the Administrative Office of the Courts, 511 Union Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37219.



**TENNESSEE TRIAL COURT VACANCY COMMISSION  
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS**

511 UNION STREET, SUITE 600  
NASHVILLE CITY CENTER  
NASHVILLE, TN 37219

**TENNESSEE BOARD OF PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY  
TENNESSEE BOARD OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT  
AND OTHER LICENSING BOARDS**

**WAIVER OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

I hereby waive the privilege of confidentiality with respect to any information that concerns me, including public discipline, private discipline, deferred discipline agreements, diversions, dismissed complaints and any complaints erased by law, and is known to, recorded with, on file with the Board of Professional Responsibility of the Supreme Court of Tennessee, the Tennessee Board of Judicial Conduct (previously known as the Court of the Judiciary) and any other licensing board, whether within or outside the State of Tennessee, from which I have been issued a license that is currently active, inactive or other status. I hereby authorize a representative of the Trial Court Vacancy Commission to request and receive any such information and distribute it to the membership of the Commission and to the Office of the Governor.

Renee Michelle Howser  
Type or Print Name

*R. Michelle Howser*  
Signature

July 25, 2023  
Date

025891  
BPR #

Please identify other licensing boards that have issued you a license, including the state issuing the license and the license number.

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