



P R E S E N T S

MEET THE CANDIDATES 2020

Melissa Ann Gould

Candidate for Manatee County Court Judge, Group 4

Preamble: I greatly appreciate this opportunity. The Jewish community has always been an important part of my life and I'm proud to be a Lion of Judah at the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee and a member and volunteer at Temple Emanu-El. More importantly, the bedrock Jewish values of Tikun Olam (repairing the world), Tzedakah (charitable giving) and Chesed (kindness and compassion) are critical elements of who I strive to be as a person.

Why are you running for County Judge?

Through a lot of hard work and perseverance in high school, I was offered academic and athletic scholarships, but my passion and one of the driving forces in my life has always been giving back to my community. In my teen years I won major awards for volunteerism and leadership, but while the honors were nice (and humbling) to receive, the real satisfaction for me was in building and strengthening my community and/or helping disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups.

I was on the Dean's List as an undergraduate university student and then I chose to pursue my legal studies at the City University of New York because it was and is considered by many to be the premier public interest law school in the country. While I was at CUNY I interned with a New York Supreme Court Judge and it was one of the most exhilarating learning experiences of my life. Since that time, my professional goal has been to serve on the bench and I've tried to strategically manage my career to prepare myself for that role.

After graduating from law school close to the top of my class, I decided to further my education by attending the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, one of the most prestigious universities in the world where I received a Master of Law (LL.M) degree. When I returned to the Tampa Bay area, I met my future husband, Ryan Jawitz and moved to Michigan with him for three years so he could complete his residency in dermatology. While in Michigan, I worked in civil litigation, business and contract law as well as consumer protection. I also taught law courses in Family Law, Constitutional Law and Judicial Process at Oakland University. In addition, I volunteered at the University of Michigan's highly regarded Innocence Clinic and worked on cases to help exonerate wrongly convicted prisoners.

Ryan grew up in Manatee County and his parents, Dr. Jack Jawitz and Dr. Paula Brooks Jawitz have spent more than 35 years in this area, so it was an easy decision for us to move back here and make this exceptional community our 'forever' home.

Driven by my strong desire to give a voice to victims and serve the community as well as keeping in mind my goal of becoming a judge, to help further prepare me for that position, I applied for and became an Assistant State Attorney in the 12th Judicial Circuit, which includes Manatee County. For the last several years I've had the honor and privilege of successfully serving our community as a misdemeanor, felony and special intake prosecutor and I've handled cases involving the following: Sexual Battery; Domestic Violence; Child Abuse; Exploitation of the Elderly; Trafficking and Selling Narcotics; Driving Under the Influence (DUI); White Collar Crime; Burglary and Animal Cruelty.

The list of legal and criminal matters I've worked on goes on and on, but no matter who I'm interacting with I know that I'm representing the people of Florida and I always endeavor to demonstrate the enduring values of honesty and integrity and to treat everyone with fairness and respect. I feel especially compelled to show my empathy and compassion to the victims of crime. Those characteristics are also invaluable in some of the volunteer jobs I'm currently doing. I work with that great organization, Meals on Wheels on a weekly basis and during this pandemic I regularly call isolated seniors who belong to my synagogue just to say hi and see if they need any help.

In addition to all of the regular issues in the judicial system, the impact of COVID-19 and the other challenges in the country have created new challenges for our courts and elsewhere.

We need strategic thinking, innovative ideas and a commitment to problem-solving to deal with our ever-changing legal environment and the new 'new normals' that seem to be emerging every day. As I indicated above, giving back is in my DNA and I'm hoping to continue on that journey as the next Manatee County Court Judge. I believe my knowledge, skills, experience and values have ideally prepared me for this very important role

How long have you been a practicing attorney? How much of your law career has been devoted to trial law?

I graduated with my law degree and was admitted to practice in 2007. As mentioned earlier, while I was in law school I had the good fortune of interning for a judge and I had the responsibility of observing evidentiary hearings and trials and then drafting opinions for the judge. I also spent a semester interning at the New York State Attorney General's Office and I helped the lawyers there prepare for cases concerning professional misconduct. As a result, I gained very valuable courtroom experience even before being a licensed attorney.

After graduating, I worked in civil litigation and represented clients in insurance litigation, business and contract law, homeowner disputes, consumer protection and many other matters.

My most important and impactful courtroom experience has been having the honor of giving a voice to victims and representing the people of the State of Florida as an Assistant State Attorney in the 12th Judicial Circuit, which includes Manatee County. During that time I've handled literally thousands of cases, including jury trials where I was lead counsel or second chair, non-jury trials and adversarial hearings.

I've prosecuted a wide-range of misdemeanor and felony cases. I'm pleased to say that I've had a very high success rate; I've helped victims get the justice and compensation they deserved; and I've served as a calm, skilled problem-solver and assisted in diplomatically de-escalating many potentially explosive situations.

I was also designated by the Florida Supreme Court to assist the Office of Statewide Prosecution (a department of the Office of the Attorney General of Florida) to work on a multi-jurisdictional, complex elderly exploitation case that secured a guilty verdict.

I'm proud that I've both formally and informally mentored several younger attorneys and helped them in various ways as well as assisting them with their trials. I believe I've done a very good job in that regard, but even more important than teaching them trial techniques and strategy, I've reinforced how critical it is to be open-minded and always treat everyone with respect and fairness.

What, if any, changes would you like to see in the judicial process?

I believe the Twelfth Judicial Circuit judges have done an outstanding job serving our community. Recently, very honorable and hard-working judges have retired or will be retiring and this will bring new people to the bench. This change will create opportunities for new perspectives and insights in our court system to help deal with some old challenges as well as new and emerging problems in our ever-changing world.

I think expanding diversionary programs could greatly benefit Manatee County. I recognize, however, that I would have to work with the resources available. I have experience writing grant proposals to different levels of government and private foundations and I would certainly do my best and work with others to try to secure greater funding for these programs. I think building a more diverse network of community agencies would also enhance the court system for the people of Manatee County. For example, if someone needs help drafting a resume, finding a place to live or combatting drug addiction, there are already social services agencies ready to assist. Growing that network of community partners and encouraging much more collaboration will only help create a more cohesive and less fragmented use of resources.

Finally, I would like to generate additional partnerships with pro-bono attorney associations. County Court has been called the People's Court because individuals represent themselves in a very large number of cases (i.e. landlord/tenant cases, small claims court, etc.). If people had increased access to attorneys, that would likely lead to more informed litigants and, therefore, efficiency in court proceedings.

What qualifies you to be a Judge?

I've answered most of this question in the *Why Are You Running for County Judge* section, but there are a few additional factors I'd like to point out. They include the following:

- The crime rate in Manatee County has gone down significantly during my time in the State Attorney's Office (SAO). This is due in significant part to an array of collaborative efforts among the SAO, law enforcement and several community partners. I've played a meaningful role in those efforts by regularly leading or participating in educational programs on a variety of topics for law enforcement and different community agencies.
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) Florida honored me with a 'Recognition of Excellence' award for my work prosecuting impaired drivers.
- My long and rich history in the volunteer world combined with my professional experience has resulted in me dealing with very diverse people in very diverse contexts and I'm skilled and comfortable working with people of every race, religion, ethnicity, culture and socio-economic status who may come before the bench.
- In addition to having served on committees and boards of non-profit organizations as well as doing the front-line volunteer work I referenced earlier, I've participated in helping to write grant proposals to different levels of government and private foundations over the past several years that generated approximately one and a half million dollars. This skill set is particularly relevant to my judicial aspirations. Manatee County and other communities periodically secure outside funding to initiate specialty and/or problem-solving judicial initiatives. I think this is extremely important to the long-term effectiveness of our court system and the well-being of our community.
- A lot of people strongly believe that I have the intellect, integrity, temperament and commitment to the law to be an exceptionally effective jurist and I was encouraged by a large number of individuals to pursue this position. Since announcing my intentions to run, I've received very broad-based support for my campaign from almost every demographic group in Manatee County. In addition, I've secured many endorsements, but I've made the decision not to publish most of them. When elected, I plan to run my courtroom like I'm running my campaign, fair and unbiased. I don't want to create even a perception of impropriety or that I have an alliance with a group or anyone representing a unit of government that would likely come before me as a judge.

What else should our readers know about you that will help them get to know you better prior to the election?

As I noted in the *Preamble* section, being Jewish is a critical part of my identity. My maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors and our family set up a trust to support Holocaust education. In addition, my parents have both been actively involved with Jewish and non-Jewish non-profit causes and organizations throughout my life and they raised me to be a proud, strong caring Jewish woman who is also very involved with my community.

My father has been the CEO of the Tampa JCC and Federation for the past 15 years and since becoming an attorney I've done a lot of pro bono work for that organization.

I'm also a volunteer consultant with the Florida-Israel Business Accelerator (FIBA). That initiative, which is currently in discussions to create a partnership with the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee, helps bring the U.S. operations of Israeli companies to Florida. The goals of FIBA are to strengthen Israel, bring jobs and technology to Florida and shine a light on Israel-the Start-up Nation- outside of the geopolitical realm.

All of these experiences have broadened my horizons and combined with my personal values and professional qualifications to help prepare me for a role on the bench. If elected as your next Manatee County Court Judge, I promise to administer our laws with a depth of knowledge, and firmness, but also with compassion and empathy. As an attorney, wife, mother and community member, I stand ready to serve with integrity and impartiality.

Respectfully,

Melissa Gould



The Jewish Federation
OF SARASOTA-MANATEE