

Conversations with Vanessa Gilmore

February 2023



Today we'd like to introduce you to Vanessa Gilmore.

Hi Vanessa, thanks for joining us today. We'd love for you to start by introducing yourself.

After graduating from Hampton University in 1977, I moved to Houston to begin a career as a fashion buyer for Foley's Department Store, I decided to undertake a career in law after representing myself in a minor civil lawsuit against my apartment complex. I attended the University of Houston law center and afterward, I began a thirteen-year career as a civil litigator.

I was very actively involved in the Houston civic community and served a term as president of the YWCA of Houston. I also served on the board of the Texas Department of Commerce and as chairperson, Texans for NAFTA. In those roles, I worked with US and Mexican business leaders, including the president of Mexico, to increase tourism and business development for the state of Texas.

In 1993, President Clinton nominated me to become a federal judge. When I was sworn in, in 1994, I was the youngest sitting federal judge in the nation. I was also the first University of Houston graduate to become a federal judge. During my nearly twenty-eight years as a federal judge, I worked on civil and criminal cases including intellectual property, securities class actions, oil and gas, employment discrimination, and commercial litigation.

I handled significant matters including trials related to the fall of the Enron corporation and the environmental matters relating to the building of the Galveston cruise ship terminal. I have written important decisions on the first amendment, voting rights, intellectual property, and insurance issues. I retired from the federal bench in 2022 and now use those skills in my new role as a mediator/arbitrator and special master with JAMS.

During my entire tenure as a judge, I hosted a tea in my chambers every week for members of the community. I have continued that tradition at my new tearoom called Tea With Judge V which is located in the Hotel King David on Houston's historic Riverside Drive. In addition to those business endeavors, I also work as a voiceover artist, public speaker, and television legal commentator, and serve on the board of one corporation.

I have continued to be an active member of the Houston Civic Community. I currently serve on the boards of the DePelchin Children's Center, Texas Children's Hospital, the Houston Fund for Social Justice and Economic Equity, and the Kinder Institute for Urban

Research. I am the author of four books, including a book for the children of incarcerated parents and a fiction novel called Saving the Dream that I wrote to encourage families and single people to pursue their dreams of parenting through adoption. I helped my son secure a patent and start a company to market and sell his invention, the Sleepover Bed Tent, for which we are currently seeking a licensing

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opportunity. I am single. I enjoy golf, yoga, and salsa dancing. I am the mother of one adopted son who is a student at American University in Washington, D.C. where he is studying finance.

Alright, so let's dig a little deeper into the story – has it been an easy path overall and if not, what were the challenges you've had to overcome?

I am a firm believer that we don't grow unless we face and overcome obstacles. Smooth seas don't make for skillful sailors. It is the lessons that we learn from overcoming that help us to grow. When I was in my first apartment, the managers of that complex went into my apartment and stole all of my photography equipment. That motivated me to figure out how to sue them. Winning that minor lawsuit resulted in me leaving my job as a fashion buyer to attend law school.

When I entered law school at the University of Houston, there were not many students of color. In my first semester, I had a professor tell me that he looked up my exam number and gave me the grade he thought I should have rather than the higher grade I had earned because I was black. His blatant discrimination made me work even harder in law school so that I could show that this grade was an outlier and did not reflect the work I was able to do.

After my service on the board of the Texas Department of Commerce, Governor Ann Richards nominated me to the Court of Appeals. My nomination was blocked for political reasons that had nothing to do with me. I then assisted another woman in her efforts to be elected to that position. A year later, President Clinton nominated me to the federal bench.

During the confirmation process, my effort to help someone else secure the seat I thought I was going to have was cited to me as an indication that I would have a good judicial temperament. Sometimes what others mean for harm, God means for good. I have had other disappointments in my personal life, as many people have, but I have learned that during the darkest times, I should be still and try to hear what God's will is for my life.

Appreciate you sharing that. What else should we know about what you do?

I see myself as a problem solver and community builder. I am fortunate that my work and community involvement have enabled me to do these things. As a judge, I was required to use my education, training, and experience to help people with the resolution of their problems.

I am using those same skills in my work at JAMS as a neutral to assist people with the mediation and arbitration of their disputes and to provide a neutral review of matters before the inception of litigation. I feel very fortunate to be able to assist people in this way. I also enjoy building community. Having tea in my chambers every week was a way for me to help students, scout troops, lawyers and other members of the community see the inner workings of the justice system.

I am now creating that same sense of community at "Tea With Judge V" where I host teas on the weekends to bring the community together, educate my guests about the many health benefits of tea, and provide a place to showcase local businesses and writers. I am a sought-after public speaker and this allows me even more opportunities to share and educate, and I feel blessed to be able to do so.

Is there something surprising that you feel even people who know you might not know about?

Most people probably don't know that I am a lot of fun. I enjoy salsa dancing and I love to tell jokes. I almost accepted a challenge to go on stage at a comedy show while I was on vacation for one year, but I chickened out in the end because it didn't seem that it would be an appropriate thing for a judge to do. Now that I am retired, I hope that someone will invite me on stage to either salsa dance or tell jokes one day.

