

Profiles in justice

Tribe's first court justices, judges take the bench

BY EILEEN SOLER
Staff Reporter

their rights honored and their voices heard.”

Chief Justice Willie Johns, of Brighton. Member of the Wild Cat Clan.

Associate Justice Moses Jumper Jr., of Big Cypress. Member of the Snake Clan.



Service to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and Indian Country: Commissioner of the National Indian Finals Rodeo for 22 years; president of Eastern Indian Rodeo Association for four years; served eight years as the Seminole Tribe's Education

Service to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and Indian Country: Founder and director of the Tribe's Recreation Department for 37 years; inductee and founder of the Tribe's Sports Hall of Fame; published author of two Seminole history inspired poetry books; past president and founder of both the Native American Youth Organization (NAYO) and Native American Sports Association (NASA) serving Tribes in the southeast region; past editor of the Tribe's first newspaper, The Alligator Times; president of the Big Cypress Cattle Committee; member of the Court and Constitution committees; member of the Haskell Indian Nations Foundation; founder and coordinator of the Howard Tiger Teacher Award at Haskell Indian Nations University.

Photos by Robert Kippenberger

Department director; was employed 14 years as a livestock inspector for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; worked six years as an outreach specialist at Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum; is the southeastern regional liaison for the Tribal Historic Preservation Office; and currently sits on the Museum's repatriation committee. Johns has assisted in the repatriation of 21 Seminole ancestors from scattered locations throughout the United States.

Education: Attended the University of Tampa; Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma; Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas; and Oklahoma Panhandle State University in Goodwell. Jumper's preferred fields of study were animal science and physical education, and although his grades were fine and his courses were eclectic, he was devoted to playing baseball and football.

Education: Holds a two-year degree in animal husbandry from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College; a bachelor's degree in history from Palm Beach Atlantic University; and a master's degree in history from the University of Miami. Johns is just a few credits short of a master's in jurisprudence, or the study and theory of law. "It's not to become a lawyer; it's to be a smarter judge."

Inspiration: "When I was a little kid, I used to be good friends with the first Chairman, Billy Osceola, who lived down the road. He encouraged me to get as much education as I could. He told me that someday our Tribe would be able to take care of ourselves and we would need our own people, educated enough to take the ball and run with it. Almost every day I think of what he said." Johns also credits his uncle Toby Johns who instilled in his sister, Johns' mother, that education is the way out of poverty. "From the day I started kindergarten all the way to college, my mother stayed on my (buttocks) to make sure I went to school."

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Inspiration: His mother, the late Betty Mae Tiger Jumper, whose historic successes included being the only female to serve as Tribal Chairperson. "She is an icon. I saw her devotion to the Tribe and our family and her work ethic all come together. She was a huge political figure but she was also athletic and loved kids. I went into the sports realm to serve our Tribal children because of my mother. She was a major motivator."

Personal significance of Tribal Court: For Johns, Tribal Court is a "leg of our sovereignty. Now we can show the world that we have a judicial system, we can try cases, we can be fair, hold people to the laws and we can make rulings for the good of the Tribe."

Personal significance of Tribal Court: "When I was approached for Tribal Court, I thought and prayed hard about it. It's something great to be on the ground floor of something so important and while I might not be perfect, I know the laws, the Constitution and I have common sense." Jumper looks forward to the future when the Tribal Court grows to take on domestic, land and criminal cases. "The law should return to us and let us make decisions for our people whether we use traditional ways or local and state laws or both."

Chief Judge Moses B. Osceola, of Hollywood. Member of the Bird Clan.



Service to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and Indian Country: After a late 1960s stateside stint in the U.S. Marine Corps, Osceola worked several jobs for the Tribe. He was an accounts payable clerk for the secretary and treasurer; an accounting clerk

Associate Justice Amy Johns, of Brighton. Member of the Wild Cat Clan.

for the Accounting Department; a tour guide at Okalee Indian Village; and head of the Tribe's food stamp program and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) supplemental food program. He owned a tobacco shop in Hollywood for about 10 years and clerked for several others until he sold his business to the Board of Directors. He was elected president of the Board for the 2003-2007 term and thus served simultaneously as vice chairman of Tribal Council.

Service to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and Indian Country: Chief executive administration officer 2007-2012; vice treasurer 2004-2007; executive administrative assistant 2002-2004; background investigation clerk 1997; administrative assistant 1995; social worker aide 1993-1994. Johns interned with the Arizona Senate in 2001; a residential youth program for the Gila River Indian Community in 1999; and the Salt River Pima/Maricopa Tribal Court in the Defense Advocate Program in 1998. In 1998 she volunteered at the Child Welfare Center of the La Mesita Homeless Shelter in Mesa, Arizona.

Education: Osceola holds a bachelor's degree in business administration management from Florida International University. While earning the degree, he focused heavily on business management.

Education: Johns holds a Master of Public Administration degree from Arizona State University; a Bachelor of Social Work from Arizona State University; and a Certificate of Accounting Operations from Sheridan Vocational-Technical School in Hollywood, Florida.

Inspiration: "Many of us want to see things become better legally, spiritually and economically for the Tribe, but we can't make an impact without being involved. I thought I could contribute better by being involved and when I left the office (of president) I left businesses up and running and money in the bank. It was during that tenure that we made the Hard Rock deal. For me, my inspiration has always been a matter of being able to contribute in a major way."

Personal significance of Tribal Court: "As an Unconquered Tribe, our tribal culture and customs are critically important in maintaining peace and equilibrium within our communities. The establishment of a Tribal Court system is a crucial step towards embracing the uniqueness of our ways, while further promoting our self-reliance and sovereignty. Only when we can fully address our grievances/issues within a Tribal Court system, presided over by Tribal people, can we begin to fully embrace and appreciate the Tribe we have evolved into today. Too often, the state,

Personal significance of Tribal Court: For Osceola, Tribal Court is a "great adjunct, division, branch" of tribal government. "We don't refer to the Chairman's Office as the executive branch, but I'd like to see that someday ... the court gives voice to the people to resolve issues in a legitimate forum where they are accorded due process. The court has a duty to listen to both sides and ensure that everyone has



county and even federal court systems are ill-equipped to deal with the various cultural/traditional nuances that accompany Tribal members and their families as they enter those systems. Through the establishment of a Tribal Court system, we are creating an environment that will provide justice, fairness and most importantly, it will be sensitive to the needs of the people it serves, from a Seminole standpoint."

Associate Judge Tina Marie Osceola, of Naples. Descendant of the Panther Clan.

Service to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and Indian Country: Junior Miss Seminole 1983; Miss Seminole 1986; worked nine years as the public affairs specialist for Collier County Sheriff's Office; was hired in 2004 as the Tribe's chief historic resources officer, where she worked through 2011; co-owned Unconquered Strategies LLC.

Education: Master of Public Administration from Nova Southeastern University; Bachelor of Arts degree in political science from Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.

Inspiration: "I believe I was born with the drive to not just do but see justice, the right thing, be done. It's what has driven me all my life. My first introduction to political activism was when I was a little girl and I read about Native American rights. At the same time, I was lucky enough to live through the '80s, comprehend apartheid and what Nelson Mandela fought for. It drove me as an individual to fight for right at all costs. Now at age 47, I understand what justice is." Osceola credits her need to do the right things in life to having been raised in a loving, intact family with both parents and both sets of grandparents as role models. "I know what it is like to have a legacy to live up to. I will not leave a mess behind. For the grandchildren I may never meet, I will not do anything they could be ashamed of."

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Associate Judge Mary Tigertail, of Big Cypress. Member of the Otter Clan.

Service to the Seminole Tribe of Florida and Indian Country: Tribal drug abuse counselor for two years; Big Cypress Recreation Department director for seven years; Hendry County bus driver servicing Big Cypress residents for 12 years; assistant manager at Billie Swamp Safari for 10 years; cattle owner for 22 years; Recreation volunteer for decades; former boys basketball coach and bus driver for the first Seminole team to win a NAYO championship (for which she earned the nickname Mary Bird); raised five children and now is the proud matriarch of 29 grandchildren.

Education: Tigertail started her college career as a criminology student at Palm Beach State College. She switched majors along the way, eventually earning an Associate of Science degree in business administration and management.

Inspiration: Her 29 grandchildren. "I want them to have a better life than I had growing up. I want them to have a better education and better things in life. I want to encourage all of our (Tribal) children to stay in school because if they don't have education they can't do much." Tigertail is also compelled by the unhappy, empty lives of today's youth that often results from negative family conditions and parents who provide little example for sober, productive lives.

Personal significance of Tribal Court: "I see Tribal Court as a way to help our children. We can give them better homes, help them make better choices and teach them that money isn't everything. I see when the public court system takes a child from their family and sends them outside the Tribe. Things can go very bad. If we can help them in the community, within the Tribe, we would be doing good. Tribal Court is not just to dole out justice; it is to help our people along the way."



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Hollywood children lead the audience, Tribal leaders and soon-to-be sworn in justices and judges in the Pledge of Allegiance and the Seminole Pledge.

TRIBAL COURT

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"Wow, it's finally here and we are all very, very happy," said Buster, who with Deloris (Lois) Alvarez, of Immokalee, and many other Tribal members, created the Tribal Court Committee in 2005.

"We've been on this since day one. For 10 years. That is forever ago," Buster said.

"It means we are on our own, and it gives teeth and bones to our sovereignty," Alvarez said.

Members of Florida's 17th Judicial Circuit Court – Judges Kenneth Gillespie, of the Juvenile Division, and Renee Goldenberg, of Family Court – also attended. Other noted guests included Johnna Blackhair, acting eastern regional director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA); Jonodev Osceola Chaudhuri, acting Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Commission; and 94-year-old Maggie Osceola, who Chairman Billie said is likely the Tribe's oldest elder.

Maggie Osceola, her long hair traditionally rolled in a hairnet and secured with pretty hairpins, held the Bible on which her son, Chief Judge Moses B. Osceola, swore the judicial oath.

Stan Wolfe, the director of the Tribe's Tribal Court, will oversee court operations. Wolfe, who studied law at Washburn University in Kansas, is a past project manager for the Justice Research and Statistics Association, former prosecutor for the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians and former magistrate for the Eastern Band of Cherokee.

Wolfe said Chief Justice Johns and Chief Judge Osceola were to begin working full-time schedules immediately after taking the judicial oath. Court offices are staffed and furnished in Hollywood and Big Cypress, but hearings can be held anywhere as needed.

"The other judges and justices will work on a case-by-case basis. If they are needed more, they will work more," Wolfe said.

The courts will deal primarily with civil cases, such as child welfare issues and Tribal member disputes.

Chief Justice Johns said the justices and judges started training in December 2013 after they were chosen by the Tribal Court Committee and then approved by a panel of elected officials and elders. Individually, they immersed themselves in a variety of independent law courses, but they also attended law conferences and symposiums as a group across the nation.

According to the Tribal Court Clearinghouse, a project of the Native American-owned and operated Tribal Law and Policy Institute, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 restored power to Tribes for establishing justice codes and court systems.

More recently, President Barack Obama's 2013 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act gave Native American courts the right to prosecute non-Natives who do not live on tribal land for charges of domestic or sexual violence on reservations.

In February 2014, the Tulalip Tribes of Washington state became the first in the nation to take criminal jurisdiction over non-Natives who commit domestic violence on a reservation.

Prosecution of such cases is allowed to begin in May 2015.

"When any guy can come on a reservation and abuse a woman, it's one of the worst things to happen on our land," Justice Jumper said.

Generally, according to the BIA, tribal courts have civil and also criminal jurisdiction (if so structured) over Native and non-Native people who break tribal laws while residing in, participating in functions at, or doing business on reservations.

Tribal courts are also responsible for deciding a gamut of family welfare issues, such as child guardianship or custody, paternity and sanctioning adoptions, marriages and divorces. Tribal courts can also award child support and settle death claims.

Justice Jumper said the Tribe's court system was "long overdue." It joins a list of 277 already established Tribal courts among Indian Country's 566 federally recognized Tribes.

He predicts that the court program will expand in time for the Tribe and Indian Country.

"There are many injustices that Native courts could take on – all the way up to honoring treaties that were made when America was formed out of our land," he said.



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Maggie Osceola holds a Bible on which her son, Chief Judge Moses B. Osceola, takes the judicial oath Feb. 19 at the Tribal Court inauguration ceremony.



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Chairman James E. Billie congratulates the three justices and three judges sworn in during the Tribal Court inauguration ceremony.